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Voluntary action on sodium not enough: Study

By Caroline Scott-Thomas, 15-Sep-2009

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Governments should use regulation to reduce sodium consumption as the food industry is not doing enough, according to the authors of a new study published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*.

The health impacts of excessive sodium consumption have been well-researched, and it has been linked to high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and stroke. Canadians, the authors wrote, currently consume more than double the highest recommended daily amount of 2,300mg. But there are two major problems for manufacturers in reducing sodium content: Firstly, they must do so while maintaining consumer acceptance and, secondly, they must often find a way to replace the functionality of salt as a preservative or as an inhibitor for leavening agents.

The authors recognize at least part of this problem, writing: *"From a food technology perspective, it is unclear how quickly and extensively sodium can be reduced in foods without impacting consumer appeal."*

The food industry has been making efforts to reduce sodium for some time, largely on the back of consumer demand and health concerns, and there is a host of ingredients on the market that can be used as alternatives.

However, the authors wrote that an approach based on regulation and partnership between the food industry and government is likely to be more effective. This idea is based on Finnish experience, which has seen sodium consumption – and blood pressure – plummet following a plan *"anchored on partnership and regulation of the food industry and consumer education via mass media."*

They wrote: *"Although voluntary action by the food industry may be the preferred option to initiate sodium reduction, its absence calls for governments to use their regulatory capacity to bring about change."*

The authors claim that changing the approach to sodium in Canada could lead to a 30 percent reduction in the rate of hypertension (high blood pressure), an 8.6 percent reduction in the rate of *"hypertension-related cardiovascular events"* and could save about \$2bn in related health care costs, without taking into account other sodium-related health risks.

Their policy recommendations for slashing sodium intake include mandating simple, easy-to-understand labeling of sodium on all food products, initiating public education campaigns, and setting timelines for sodium reduction.

This latest study examining ways to tackle excessive sodium consumption comes on the heels of a study in the latest issue of the *American Journal of Health Promotion* that also mentioned regulating sodium content in processed foods.

Source: *Canadian Medical Association Journal*

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"Effective population-wide public health interventions to promote sodium reduction"

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