

# Salt: the labels that let us down

We are all being urged to watch our salt intake, so why do some food companies make it tougher than it should be? *Sweet* investigates.



The latest news from the front line of the war against salt in our diet seems to be good. According to the Food Standards Agency (FSA), salt intake in adults in the UK has fallen from 9.5g per day to 8.6g per day – a reduction of about 10 per cent since 2001.

Welcoming the announcement, Professor Graham MacGregor of the lobby group Consensus on Salt and Health (CASH) said that the reduction – and the fall in the nation's blood pressure that has followed – means that around 6,000 deaths a year from heart attack and stroke have been saved. 'The UK is leading the world in the drive to save lives by cutting salt and many countries are now starting to follow the UK's lead,' he said.

However, the fact that we are eating less salt is not because we have thrown away our salt cellars at home: only about 15 per cent of the salt we eat is what we sprinkle on our food. It is food manufacturers who have voluntarily reduced the amount of salt they add to our food every year, to the tune of nearly 20,000 tonnes, or – as Professor MacGregor puts it – the weight of more than 3,000 bull elephants.

The Food and Drink Federation, which represents hundreds of food companies, reports that its members have voluntarily reduced average salt levels in products ranging from bread to breakfast cereals, savoury snacks to soups, and biscuits to pizzas, by between 25 per cent and 40 per cent in the past few years.

All of which is undoubtedly good news for consumers, especially those who have an urgent need to keep their blood pressure down because they have a family history of heart attack or stroke, or another risk-elevating factor such as diabetes.

### More to do

Yet at 8.6g of salt a day, our intake is still much higher than the FSA's target of 6g a day (and that's a maximum limit, not a target to aim for). As CASH calculates that for every 1g reduction, around 7,000 premature deaths are prevented, that means that we could be saving more than 17,000 lives a year if the UK's overall intake did fall to that 6g per day figure.

So what more can be done? The FSA's strategy, which it sees as successful so far, is to continue to press manufacturers to cut more salt out of their products. It will also introduce new, stricter targets for salt levels in various categories of food such as baked beans, crisps, pizzas and takeaway sandwiches. Recently, some companies have begun to complain that

these further cuts might not only make foods taste too bland, but could also affect quality issues such as shelf-life and even public health (as one purpose of salt in processed foods is as a preservative against toxins).

CASH points out however that there are already some big gaps between different brands in terms of salt content. Heinz Tomato Ketchup has 3.1g per 100g for example, while Tesco Organic tomato ketchup has just 1g. Hovis Granary (medium sliced) has 1.25g per 100g, compared to Sainsbury's Wholemeal (medium sliced), which has 0.7g. And Tesco cooked ham slices have 2.5g salt per 100g, while Asda cooked ham slices have 1.6g.

'If one manufacturer can produce a particular food with lower levels of salt, it is self-evident that other manufacturers can do it for the same product,' says CASH's nutritionist Carrie Bolt.

One part of the strategy on which all parties do agree is that consumers need to be made more aware of how much salt there is in our food. As the food companies group, the FDF, says: 'We support the aim of the

FSA's salt information campaign to raise awareness among consumers of the importance of checking salt levels in food and, where appropriate, choosing the lower salt option.'

The FSA has spent a great deal of money on its salt campaign; most of us will probably have seen the TV commercials, posters and magazine advertisements asking us if our food is 'full of it' and reminding us to check our labels for salt content.

But simple as that may sound, it can be very difficult indeed, as *Sweet* reader Caroline Lashley found (see page 14). Look for salt content on a label and you may find no information at all, or you may see a 'sodium' content stated instead. And this is mightily confusing to consumers, as a survey by CASH found in 2004. While 74 per cent of people said they were aware of the 6g a day salt target, two in three either did not know that salt and sodium were related, or thought that they were the same thing.

In fact, there are 2.5g of salt in each gram of sodium, so you need to multiply by 2.5 to get the salt content per 100g and then do a ►►

## What do the labels say?

Here is a selection of foods on sale in a major supermarket in August that carry sodium-only labelling or no sodium content stated (N/A).

**Note:** According to FSA criteria, foods high in sodium have more than 0.6g per 100g; foods low in sodium have less than 0.1g per 100g.

Brand	Sodium per 100g
Aunt Bessie's Tidgy Toads	0.7
Cathedral City Cheddar Lighter	0.7
Dickinson & Morris Pork Pie	N/A
Dr Oetker Ristorante Pizza Mozzarella	0.48
Duchy Originals Fresh Tomato Soup	0.26
Findus Macaroni Cheese	0.3
Laughing Cow Light Cheese Slices	0.78
Leerdammer Cheese	N/A
Pizza Express House Dressing	0.94
Rankin Irish Pork Sausages	1.3
Riso Gallo Risotto Pronto	N/A
Rustlers Flame Grilled QuarterPounder	0.64
Schwartz Shepherd's Pie Mix	5.0
Sharwood's Sweet Chilli Sauce	1.45
SPAM Lite	0.89
Sodebo Just for Me Pizza	N/A
Stark Naked Fresh Basil Pesto	0.7
Uncle Ben's Bacon & Mushroom Risotto	0.5
Wagamama Spicy Chilli Men Sauce	0.8
Willow Spread	N/A

further calculation to get the amount of salt per portion. Not surprisingly, 69 per cent of those surveyed by CASH said that sodium information on labels was 'incomprehensible,' and only one in 10 bravely claimed they understood it.

So when simple, at-a-glance labelling of salt content is one of the most obvious ways to help us cut down, why do so many foods fail to carry it?

The answer lies in the largely voluntary system of food labelling we currently have in the UK. It is only compulsory to put nutrition labels on foods if they make a claim about an ingredient such as 'low-fat,' or a health claim such as 'contains calcium, good for bones,' or if they have had vitamins or minerals (not salt though) added to them.

And even if food companies follow the FSA's voluntary guidelines in full, this requires them only to state the sodium content, not the salt equivalent.

### How many comply?

The FSA estimates that 80 per cent of UK pre-packaged foods provide nutrition information. But because the system is voluntary, the FSA is limited in what it can do to reinforce its '6g salt limit' message with a consistent, clear labelling of salt content across all foods. 'The FSA recommends that the amount of salt equivalent is also provided underneath, but outside of, the main nutrition panel,' it says. 'A large proportion of food companies provide this additional information on their labels.' Specifically, the manufacturers' body the FDF says that at the end of 2006, 59 per cent

### Label watch: top tips for keeping an eye on salt

#### Go for:

- Supermarket own-brands, as most carry clear front-of-pack salt labelling.
- Foods with health or nutrition claims, as these must carry labelling.
- Brands that have adopted Guideline Daily Amount or traffic light labelling.

#### Beware:

- Gift foods, as even supermarket own-brands don't always label these.
- Deli products and foods sold loose, which have no labelling requirement.
- Imported brands, which may have different labelling or none at all.

## 'Life without salt? Unimaginable!'

Some months ago, I agreed to take part in a 14-week salt reduction research programme at St George's Hospital, south London, writes *Caroline Lashley* (right). I'm at that age where a full body MOT wouldn't go amiss – but I wasn't looking forward to it in case I discovered something I didn't like!

At St George's I was given my research instructions: they assured me they were 'simple and straightforward.' The rules, in no particular order, said that I had to:

- Watch everything I eat
- Check food labels for salt content while out shopping
- Give up crisps and other salted lovelies, such as salting freshly-cooked chip-shop chips (don't they know that's one of my favourites!)
- 'And if you're cooking from scratch, Ms Lashley,' they said (and I do mostly), 'don't add any salt to your food at any stage.' So, no pressure, then...

Making the move from salt-seasoned food to non salt-seasoned was tough going. Remembering to check my food before eating it almost turned me into one of those *CSI* investigator guys from the TV! It meant no soy sauce, Cajun-style seasoning salt, jerk seasoning, or even Caribbean-style everyday seasoning – they were all off-limits.

And shopping?

Nearly everything in my basket has salt, even cornflakes, that most healthy of breakfast cereals. Was there no escape? But I had to think of

my overall health and thankfully some of the headaches I'd been having stopped.

After 14 weeks of watching my diet, I was much more informed about salt and how it can affect the body (getting hypertension or a stroke isn't funny – and no, you're not warned in advance for either condition). I'm steadily losing weight (because I'm eating less), keeping away from salt while cooking, relying much more on dried and fresh herbs and spices, vinegar, lemon and lime juices to add zing and lift to my food.

It's been some journey going salt-less, but when I now check in with my local nurse for my weight management and blood pressure – oh yes, my BP's right back down to normal; thank the Lord for that small mercy. And I still keep my eye open for hidden salt.



of its members' products surveyed had 'salt equivalent' information on the pack.

But to sum that up another way, that's one in five foods that could carry nutrition information but don't, and four out of 10 that could state their salt content, but don't. And as our snapshot of products on page 13 shows, some of the foods that don't carry salt content information do contain a lot of sodium.

In the long term, it's likely that this state of affairs will improve with the introduction of the Food Information Regulation, a piece of European legislation that sets out a mandatory requirement for nutrition labelling on pre-packed foods, including labelling salt (not just sodium). However, the FSA cautions that it is still a proposal and the earliest any new requirements will be brought into law is 2010.

So what can we do in the meantime to avoid unknowingly overloading our diets with salt? Where foods are labelled, smarter shopping is

definitely worth it, as there is so much variation between brands. And as there are very few foods available for which there is not a more clearly-labelled alternative, there is no need to support the labels that let us down. ■

### Find out more

#### CASH

[www.actiononsalt.org.uk](http://www.actiononsalt.org.uk)  
020 8725 2409

Has many useful leaflets, sample diets and reports.

#### Food Standards Agency

[www.food.gov.uk](http://www.food.gov.uk)

Follow this link to take part in the FSA's consultation on salt reduction targets [www.salt.gov.uk](http://www.salt.gov.uk)

This part of the FSA's website is devoted to the 6g-a-day message with plenty of information.