

Consume less salt to avoid high blood pressure and heart disease

High salt intake is one of the factors leading to the increase in noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) worldwide. NCDs are the leading cause of premature death in the 21st century. Cardiovascular disease and stroke are two of the main NCDs often related to salt. In low- and middle-income countries, where 85% of all premature deaths from such diseases occur, NCDs are associated with 12 million people dying too young every year and estimated economic losses of US\$ 500 billion.

The scientific evidence linking high blood pressure to high salt intake is conclusive. In countries where salt intake was reduced by 1 gram per person per day, deaths from stroke and heart attack were reduced by more than 7%.

Data from the Eastern Mediterranean Region shows that the average salt consumption in most countries is around 10 grams per person per day, which is more than double the amount recommended by WHO. In low- and middle-income countries, following WHO's advice about how to reduce salt intake to the recommended maximum level will cost about US\$ 0.40 per person per year, or around US\$0.50 per person per year in high-income countries.

Salt is in almost everything we eat, either because high levels of salt are found in most processed and prepared foods, or because we are adding salt when we prepare food. Salt is found on dining tables, in domestic and commercial kitchens and in nearly all commercial food processing facilities.

Reducing salt intake to less than 5 grams per person per day can prevent cardiovascular disease, which is the world's number one killer. Cardiovascular disease is responsible for 17.3 million premature deaths worldwide, and by 2030 this is expected to rise to 23 million. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, cardiovascular disease, including heart disease and stroke is a major cause of disability and premature death. Data shows that 62.5% of deaths from NCDs in the Eastern Mediterranean Region are due to cardiovascular disease.

Implementing WHO's global action plan can reduce NCDs. The action plan includes nine global targets for working towards a world free of avoidable NCDs. Target four aims to reduce global salt intake by a relative 30% by 2025.

Governments, civil society groups, families and individuals can all take action to reduce salt intake and improve heart health.

Recommended actions

Among WHO recommended strategies for reducing salt is to set national standards for the amount of salt in bread since up to 40% of people's salt intake in the Region comes from salt in bread, followed by cheese, processed tomato products and meats, and the added salt during cooking or at the table.

Governments can develop policies that engage food manufacturers and retailers in salt reduction and foster salt reduction environments in schools, workplaces, communities, and cities. Industry can gradually reduce the salt content in food products.

Civil society groups can work with local communities so that people understand the health risks of salt and how to reduce salt intake.

Families and individuals can exercise their power as consumers and demand less salt in food products and reduce salt when preparing meals at home.

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