

PAHO Experts Recommend Lowering Salt Consumption to Save Lives

Reducing dietary salt consumption is a top priority in chronic disease prevention

Washington, D.C., September 11, 2009 (PAHO) — The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has formed an expert group to develop new recommendations for policies and actions to lower salt consumption in the Americas, in an effort to prevent deaths and illness from hypertension, heart and kidney failure, and stroke.

"If we lower daily salt consumption to less than 5 grams per person, we can prevent millions of deaths, and with an investment of less than 50 cents per person," said Prof. Norm Campbell, chairperson of the **Regional Expert Group on Dietary Salt reduction as population based approach to prevention of cardiovascular diseases..**

The group met at PAHO headquarters in Washington, D.C., this week to review scientific evidence, set priorities, and begin work toward a list of recommendations on reducing the amount of salt consumed by people in PAHO member countries.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has called on all the countries of the world to reduce salt consumption to no more than 5 grams per day per person, and several countries in the Americas Region—Argentina, Brazil, Canada, and Chile—have recently established national commissions or task forces to take action to reduce dietary salt consumption.

Typical modern diets provide excessive amounts of salt, from early childhood through adulthood. Consumption of more than 5 grams per day in a given population is known to increase the overall prevalence of high blood pressure. High blood pressure is the leading risk factor for death from heart attacks, strokes, and kidney and heart failure. In many countries of the Americas, salt consumption is three times the recommended level.

Adding salt at the table is not the only problem. A large proportion of dietary salt comes from processed and restaurant foods, including bread, processed meats, and even breakfast cereals.

"This means working with the food industry to reduce salt is essential," said James Hospedales, PAHO senior advisor on prevention and control of chronic diseases. "Consumers have little control over the levels of salt in processed foods. They can only avoid processed foods altogether, but that's in some cases very difficult. By working with the food industry to change their practices, we can really make a difference in salt consumption at the population level."

Members of the expert group at this week's meeting showed that reducing salt consumption at the population level is one of the most cost-effective and equitable public health measures for reducing chronic diseases.

They also noted that a number of countries use salt to supply iodine as an essential nutrient or fluoride to prevent dental caries. However, the experts concluded that salt consumption can be reduced without compromising fortification efforts. The group agreed to approach UNICEF and the International Council for the Control of

Iodine Deficiency (ICCIDD), both of which promote salt fortification, to work collaboratively on the issue.

Salt fortification is one of many factors the experts will consider in developing specific recommendations for the countries of the Americas.

"We want our countries to join a global movement to reduce dietary salt," said Hospedales. "This initiative will have a major impact on improving lives and reducing deaths in the Americas from chronic diseases."

The Pan American Health Organization, founded in 1902, works with all the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of their peoples. It serves as the Regional Office of the World Health Organization (WHO).