

## REDUCING DIETARY SALT TO IMPROVE HEALTH IN THE AMERICAS

### THE RATIONALE

The World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that increased blood pressure is the leading risk for death world wide and the second leading risk for disability.<sup>1</sup> In the Americas overall one-fifth to one-third of adults has hypertension; in Latin America and the Caribbean, the rates are among the highest in the world. Regardless of location, over 90% of people living to age 80 can expect to develop hypertension.<sup>3,4</sup> The direct and indirect costs of increased blood pressure are estimated to consume 5-15% of the Gross Domestic Product in high income countries and 2.5-8% in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup>

Elevated blood pressure accounts for about two-thirds of strokes, and about one-half of heart disease,<sup>1</sup> with the risk of developing hypertensive complications increasing with age. Even blood pressure rising within the normal range, lower than what most health care professionals consider to be 'hypertension', poses risk, causing about half of the disease attributed to elevated blood pressure.<sup>1</sup>

A healthy lifestyle can prevent blood pressure from increasing. Important is regular physical activity, avoiding excessive alcohol, attaining and maintaining a healthy body weight and following a healthy diet – lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, low fat dairy products and otherwise, foods that are low in saturated fats and salt<sup>6-10</sup>.

Salt added to food causes approximately 30% of hypertension and 10% of cardiovascular disease.<sup>7,11</sup> Pre prepared foods consumed outside the home are usually the largest source of dietary salt but in some regions, high quantities of salt are added to food cooked at home.<sup>12,13</sup>

A technical report from WHO and FAO recommends dietary salt intake of less than 5 gram per day.<sup>14</sup> Where data are available, people in the Americas are consuming up to three times this level and all age groups including children are affected<sup>15,16</sup> In response, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is launching region-wide action to reduce salt consumption at the population level, shown to be the most cost effective intervention available to improve health in low to middle income countries, and expected to be similarly cost effective in high income countries.

In September 2009, PAHO convened a group of international experts on dietary salt reduction to lead the regional initiative. They are tasked with developing a policy statement with recommendations and a "tool kit" with resources to aid governments, non-governmental organizations, organizations of health professionals, the food industry as well as PAHO, to reduce salt consumption and improve overall population health. The policy statement can be accessed [here](#).

## WHAT CAN HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS DO?

- Encourage your professional organization to endorse the PAHO policy statement on dietary salt reduction.
- Request and organize educational sessions at members' or public events on the health risks of dietary salt and how to reduce it. A PAHO slide set to assist in educational sessions will be available for download.
- Request or write articles on dietary salt reduction for your profession and your patients. A PAHO scientific reference list will be available soon to assist in writing.
- Disseminate information on dietary salt to your patients. A PAHO patient pamphlet is available [here](#).
- Promote media releases on dietary salt reduction that reach the public when new research becomes available.
- Perform or promote research on the impact of high dietary salt in your community.
- Educate policy and decision makers on the health benefits of lowering blood pressure among normotensive and hypertensive people, regardless of age.
- Request your professional organization to advocate policies and regulations that will contribute to population-wide reductions in dietary salt.

## ADVICE FOR YOUR PATIENTS

- Choose fresh, unprocessed foods.
- Gradually decrease the amount of salt used in cooking and at the table (this includes sea salt).
- Use sparingly commercially prepared condiments such as sauces.
- Flavour food with lemon juice, fresh garlic, spices, herbs and flavoured vinegars.
- Try low-salt or low-sodium seasoning mixes.
- Limit "instant", canned and pre-packaged convenience foods.
- Read food labels if available and buy brands with less salt or sodium per serving. Look for foods labelled "low" sodium or salt, "no added" sodium or salt, sodium or salt "free".
- Limit how often you eat in restaurants and reduce fast foods and take-out meals.
- Choose unsalted snack foods such as nuts and seeds.
- Limit processed, cured, smoked or breaded meats and poultry.
- Choose fresh, frozen or low-salt canned fish.
- Rinse canned foods before cooking or eating.

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