

<http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare>

An assault on men's health

Maintaining a healthy weight, drinking in moderation and not smoking are all important messages to ensure we keep in the best possible health.

Now, reducing the amount of salt in our diet has been shown to reduce the likelihood of serious chronic and potentially life threatening disease.

Most of us have little awareness of how much salt we are eating; and there are many myths surrounding our need for salt. World Salt Awareness Week (21–27 March) aims to change all this, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between salt and men's health.

Of course, we can all suffer from the adverse effects of too much salt, but research has shown that men eat more salt than women. So, salt related health problems are more often seen in men; and at an earlier stage.

In Australia the awareness campaign is co-ordinated by the Australian Division of the World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH).

Chair of AWASH and Senior Director of the George Institute for International Health, Professor Bruce Neal, recently commented that Australians are eating dangerously high levels of salt. Salt reduction and other nutrition initiatives should be seen as a key priority alongside measures to help people quit smoking and moderate alcohol consumption.

There is strong evidence that links our current high salt intake to high blood pressure which is a major cause of stroke and heart attack. And scientific research has found that even a modest reduction in salt intake for four weeks or more has a significant effect in reducing blood pressure.

It is also widely recognised that a high salt diet has other adverse effects such as osteoporosis, asthma, kidney stones and stomach cancer.

Professor Neal also said that banning food high in salt was not an appropriate option, but tough measures to control the amount of salt in foods should be considered.

The ideal daily intake of salt is only 1–2 grams per day, but many Australians consume five or 10 times that amount. In the first instance the aim is to reduce our total salt intake to around 6 grams per day – equivalent to around one teaspoonful.

The highest salt containing foods are processed foods like ready-made meals, baked beans, soups, processed meat (such as ham and bacon), smoked foods, restaurant and takeaway food, some cereal and even bread.

It is difficult to avoid eating at least some of these foods, but we need to look for low salt alternatives instead; or eat fresh foods which have no added salt.

AWASH has developed some simple ways that we can 'pinch' salt from our diet: we should limit takeaway and fast foods, avoid salty snacks or limit them to occasional treats, look for low salt or no salt options when shopping and use lemon juice, garlic, vinegar or herbs and spices when cooking. For more suggestions on how we can 'drop the salt', check out the AWASH website at: www.awash.org.au

There are a number of misconceptions about salt. For instance, it is falsely thought that you can tell what foods are high salt because of their salty taste. In reality, sugar in food can often mask the taste of salt. This is especially true of biscuits and breakfast cereals.

We should remember, too, that common salt is known chemically as sodium chloride; it's the sodium in salt that raises the blood pressure. And it doesn't matter where the salt comes from or how fancy or expensive it is – whether it's sea salt, or rock salt, whether it's in grains, crystals or flakes - it's all salt and it still contains sodium.

You can get more information on salt from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. Phone 1 300 369 772 or log onto the website www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder for the nearest location.