



May 14th 2024

Call for urgent government action to tackle “hidden killer” of salt in food

The Stroke Foundation is calling for mandatory standards for the food industry to reduce salt content in processed food, to help save thousands of New Zealand lives lost or impacted by strokes each year.

The Foundation says many New Zealanders are consuming 70 per cent more than the recommended 5-gram daily intake of salt every day – often unwittingly – because most of the salt we eat is hidden in the everyday packaged foods we buy.

“The coalition government needs to step up, for the health of New Zealanders across the motu, and introduce mandatory standards for industry to make it easier for people to eat less salt,” says Stroke Foundation Chief Executive Jo Lambert.

In 2021, the World Health Organisation (WHO) established global sodium benchmarks, establishing safe levels of sodium (salt) in eighteen food categories, using data from forty-one countries. It provided countries with the targets to help reduce national salt intake and improve population health.

“In the absence of WHO sodium benchmarks in New Zealand, we are left with voluntary initiatives including the Health Star Rating on food packaging and the Heart Foundation food industry programme,” Lambert says.

“It’s clear these voluntary industry measures aren’t working – they are too weak and the uptake of standards by manufacturers is too slow.”

Only 30 per cent of intended products carried the Health Star rating in 2023 – well below the target of 50 per cent.

Lambert says in this World Salt Awareness Week, the Stroke Foundation is calling for the introduction of the mandatory WHO sodium benchmarks to Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as mandatory Health Star Rating (HSR) on food packaging.

“With around one-fifth of our population living with high blood pressure, which is the major cause of stroke, reducing our salt intake is an absolute health priority,” she says.

“We need to be empowering people to make more informed and healthy food choices.”

Researchers from the University of Otago and University of Auckland have found that many packaged foods on New Zealand supermarket shelves¹ in 2023 exceeded the WHO sodium benchmarks. Of the 6,800 products analysed, an alarming two-thirds exceeded the benchmark.

Associate Professor Helen Eyles, a public health nutritionist from the University of Auckland, says their findings indicated there would be significant reductions in health inequities as well as savings to our health system if New Zealand introduced the benchmarks. Within 10 years, New Zealanders would gain an estimated 2,500 healthy life years (due to harm reduction from heart disease, stroke, and stomach cancer) with the health system saving approximately \$108 million over that period.

“Our modelling shows that the health benefits would be significant if the government was to limit salt intake by introducing the WHO sodium benchmarks,” Associate Professor Eyles says.

“Many everyday foods have hidden salt, such as meat alternatives like fefafel and plant-based burgers, as well as processed meat and fish, sweet pies, cakes and pastries, canned and frozen foods.”

In the latest WHO Global Report on Sodium Intake Reduction, (which scores countries on a scale of 1-4 for their progress implementing recommended strategies), New Zealand and Australia both rated poorly with a 2/4 mark. Nine countries led the way with scores of 4/4 (Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay, Saudi Arabia, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Spain, and Malaysia).

“Other countries around the world have demonstrated that salt reduction strategies, including strong pressure on industry, are achievable,” Jo Lambert says.

“Now it’s our turn.”

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About the Stroke Foundation of New Zealand

The Stroke Foundation is a national charity in New Zealand focused on the prevention of and recovery from stroke. For over 40 years we have actively promoted ways to avoid stroke and dedicated ourselves to working closely with stroke survivors across the country. The generosity of New Zealanders enables us to help thousands of stroke survivors every year, providing them with critical services to ensure the best possible outcomes – not just for themselves, but also for their family/whanau and carers too. To find out more about the Stroke Foundation, go to www.stroke.org.nz