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Shake the habit: high salt diets increasing New Zealanders' risk of stroke

Supermarket aisles are awash with salt, but consumers do not fully understand the risks, a survey reveals.

Commissioned by the Stroke Foundation of New Zealand, the survey found 41% of Kiwis do not understand that eating too much salt can lead to serious, long-term health conditions like stroke and heart attack.

This is concerning in Aotearoa, where two thirds of us consume roughly twice our recommended daily amount of salt and the number of people experiencing stroke is increasing rapidly and at younger ages.

The survey, carried out by Kantar, canvassed consumer knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours towards salt consumption.

While most surveyed (66%) were not worried about their salt consumption, with fat and sugar being of much greater concern, the survey found the link between salt, high blood pressure and stroke risk was poorly understood across the board.

Despite this, most respondents wanted to see clearer labelling on food (88%) and targets for companies to reduce the amount of salt in their products (69%).

Another report by Auckland University Master's student Neela Bhana found there was considerable room to strengthen public understanding about dietary recommendations for salt, the relationship between salt and sodium, and the health implications of consuming too much sodium.

Stroke Foundation CEO Jo Lambert says:

"A diet that is high in salt increases the risk of high blood pressure, the number one cause of stroke, which is Aotearoa leading cause of serious adult disability.

"Over 9,500 strokes are experienced in Aotearoa New Zealand every year. 75% of strokes are preventable, so we must take all possible measures to improve our health and prevent strokes from happening in the first place. One of the quickest and most effective ways of doing this is by simply reducing the salt we consume."

But how can we cut back on our salt when everything we buy is full of it? From sliced bread to biscuits, street food to 'healthy' salads, everything has added salt.

In Aotearoa, only 13% of the salt we consume is added during cooking or at the table, with the remainder coming from processed foods and takeaways.

While you can reduce your salt consumption by adding less salt to the food you prepare at home, individual action is not enough. That is why the Stroke Foundation is calling for Government action, including:

- The introduction of salt reduction targets for a wide range of processed foods – our main source of sodium.
- A mandatory Health Star Rating on packaged food to make it easier for consumers to make healthy choices.

- ENDS -

Notes to editors:

A link to a recent video – produced by Consumer NZ and the Stroke Foundation of New Zealand – highlighting the dangerously high levels of sodium in ultra-processed foods can be found, here: <https://www.facebook.com/StrokeFoundationNZ/videos/732195585068063>

Media enquiries:

The Stroke Foundation of New Zealand

Chris Green, General Manager - Marketing and Fundraising, chris.green@stroke.org.nz / 027 340 563

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