The WHO Issues Benchmarks for Sodium in Food

As long as I can remember, the medical profession and the Heart Foundation have warned us to reduce sodium (salt) in our diet in order to reduce blood pressure and the risk of stroke, and cardiovascular disease (CVD). The World Health Organisation has also recommended reduction of sodium intake as a population-level intervention to reduce CVD and mortality, and new facts show there is no reason to relax the guidelines.

An estimated 11 million deaths globally are associated with poor diet each year, including 3 million attributable to high Sodium intake.

Researchers from the Population Health Research Institute, McMaster University, Ontario Canada, measured blood pressure (BP) and sodium in almost 96,000 adults in 300 communities across 18 countries, and assessed 83,000 adults for CVD over an 8 year period.

- They found that very high sodium intake was associated with increased BP and stroke, but only in those communities with sodium intake in excess of 12 grams of salt per day, almost all of which were located in China. For most of the world's communities between 6 and 11 grams of salt per day is normal.
- There is an association between hypertensive patients and stroke, with increasing salt intake.
- On the other hand, there was a significant inverse association with communities in the lower salt intake of less than 6 grams per day showing that there was an increase in CVD mortality, meaning that low salt intake was associated with harm.

- The researchers also found that foods with a high potassium content, such as fruit, vegetables, and nuts were protective even in those communities with high salt intake.

The new WHO benchmarks, for 64 food and drink categories are aimed at guiding health authorities in its 194 member countries in talks with the food and beveridge industry.

For example, potato crisps should contain a maximum of 500mgs of sodium per 100g serving, pies and pastries up to 120mgs and processed meats up to 360mgs.

The take home message The WHO recommends that people consume less that 2,000 mg of Sodium per day - equivalent to 5 grams of salt, but on the hand, research by the Population Health Research Institute indicates your diet should not be devoid of salt.

Geoff