

Salt Restriction Efforts Paying off in SOUTH AFRICA

Research provides evidence on the effectiveness of South Africa's salt restriction legislation in young adults.

In 2016, South Africa introduced legislation to reduce the amount of salt in processed foods. The legislation was implemented with the aim of reducing high blood pressure, a significant risk factor for cardiovascular disease in South Africa. Four-and-a-half years on, a team of researchers from Australia and local researchers from North-West University and the University of the Witwatersrand have found early evidence which suggest that the implementation of this legislation has been effective in lowering the salt intake of young adults.

Findings

The [study](#), partly funded by the NRF, found that:

- Salt intake in young South Africans (20-30 years old) was reduced by about 1.2 grams per day after the implementation of the legislation to restrict the sodium content in a range of processed foods;
- Reduced salt intake was more evident in Black adult groups (about 2.04 grams per day) and groups from low socio-economic backgrounds (about 1.89 grams per day).

Salt intake reduced by about 1.2 grams per day

This research forms part of the longitudinal African-PREDICT study that began in 2013, and demonstrated that about 80% of participants, with data collected prior to legislation implementation, consumed more than the daily recommended salt intake, with the median salt intake being 7.88 gram per day at baseline. 24-hour urinary sodium excretion samples were collected from over 300 adult participants at baseline and follow-up, with the follow-up period being four-and-a-half-years. This time period spans the time before and after the implementation of the legislation.

According to the researchers:

- The reduction in salt intake in the Black and low socio-economic groups may be due to a larger proportion of food consumed by these groups being made up of the staple foods targeted by

the salt reduction legislation. Previous studies estimated that the salt regulation of bread, margarine, soup, and seasonings would lead to a 0.85 g reduction in the daily salt intake per person and, in turn, prevent around 7 400 cardiovascular disease-related deaths in South Africa per year.

- This finding is substantial when considering the larger beneficial health and economic outcomes. The level of salt reduction was predicted to result in an annual cost saving of R300 million in the South African healthcare system.

Upstream interventions

The study also highlights that intervention from food manufacturers, and the early adoption of salt reduction legislation, may have contributed to the baseline salt intake levels of the study

participants before the date of implementation of the legislation. Biochemical analyses of the salt content of 10 food products within the 13 food categories impacted by the legislation showed that 72% of food products had already met the 2016 sodium regulation targets, and only 42% met the 2019 targets.

According to the researchers, this African-PREDICT study is just one piece of evidence on the effectiveness of South Africa's salt restriction legislation. The recommendation is that more research is needed to fully understand the impact of the legislation on the population.

While more still needs to be done to achieve the World Health Organisation's recommendation that adults should consume less than five grams of salt per day, this study suggests that efforts by the South African government in terms of the salt restriction legislation, as well as the public health campaign, Salt Watch, which provides information on the salt content of common foods and encourages people to make healthier food choices, are paying off. 