

Reduce salt in foods prepared outside the home

WHAT IS IT?

Food prepared outside the home can come from restaurants, street vendors, and institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and workplaces (see information on institutional food standards).

Innovative interventions to lower salt in restaurant food have been developed for chain restaurants, independent restaurants, and institutions, but there is limited research assessing impact and few interventions in the informal food sector.

To date, existing models for restaurants each address a small fraction of the salt in restaurant foods and may need to be combined to see significant impact.

Countries are encouraged to develop innovative restaurant interventions for their regional context, with a strong evaluation design so that promising initiatives can be shared and replicated.

Potential interventions include:

Support reducing salt in restaurant food, prior to serving:

- Set standards for common ingredients and encourage restaurants, wholesalers, and packaged food companies to meet standards; use food safety infrastructure and industry associations to promote/enforce standards
- Support access to a nutritionist or chef who can help reformulate key menu items
- Encourage use of low-sodium salt (see information on low-sodium salt)

Provide consumer information (chain restaurants):

- Require access to nutrition information at the point of sale, including salt content per meal (useful for consumers and policy makers)
- Require warning labels for menu items with high salt content

Develop policies that affect the restaurant environment


- Prohibit high-salt condiments to be placed on restaurant tables; patrons must request them

RATIONALE

- In many countries, food prepared outside the home is a significant, and growing, contributor to salt intake
- Consumers do not know or have control over the amount of salt that is in the foods they eat at restaurants
- These foods are often saltier than foods cooked at home
- Reducing the salt content of menu items can be part of a broader strategy to improve the quality of foods available in the restaurant environment, supporting multiple health goals



New York City's sodium warning icon.

Warning:  indicates that the sodium (salt) content of this item is higher than the total daily recommended limit (2,300 mg). High sodium intake can increase blood pressure and risk of heart disease and stroke.

New York City's sodium warning statement.



HOW TO IMPLEMENT

1. Conduct a preliminary assessment of the food environment outside of the home: how each sector contributes to salt intake (e.g. chain restaurants, independent restaurants, etc.) and the availability of salt content information for menu items and/or ingredients
2. Consider salt reduction in the context of broader plans to improve diet quality; interventions in the restaurant environment can be designed to meet multiple health goals
3. Consider multiple approaches to address different environments, such as chain restaurants, independent restaurants, the informal food sector, and institutions.
4. Determine policy approaches available at national and local levels; consider expansion of the food safety regulatory structure to monitor/implement salt reduction interventions
5. Develop and pilot proposed policy and pre- and post-evaluation before scaling up; if effective, consider providing model legislative language for local level implementation
6. Leverage the restaurant inspection and food safety systems to deliver salt reduction messages and trainings to restaurants and to monitor salt reduction interventions
7. Support evaluations to assess changes in food composition and menu choice

WHAT IS NEEDED

- Political commitment to support multiple interventions in the away-from-home food environment, complementing other salt reduction strategies and broader health goals
- Staff to consider and design policy approaches; legal counsel may be needed to assess feasibility
- Funding to support rigorous evaluations
- Food safety staff that can strongly support policy implementation and ongoing monitoring

WHERE HAS THIS BEEN IMPLEMENTED

- There are a few successful, large-scale interventions to make the salt content of menu items more visible to consumers in chain restaurants:
 - As of 2018, the U.S. requires that nutrition information, including salt content, be available to all customers at all chain restaurants, defined as restaurants with 20 or more locations nationwide.¹²
 - As of 2016, New York City requires that restaurants with 15 or more locations nationwide post high salt warning labels next to menu items that contain more than 2,300mg and include a warning statement on all menus, which includes: "High sodium intake can increase blood pressure and risk of heart disease and stroke".¹³