Summer Conference, 6–8 July 2021, Nutrition in a changing world

The potential impact of salt reduction in ready meals and influence on front-of-pack traffic light labelling

R. Tobin[1,2], E. Power[1,2], A.L. Hagi[3] and E.L. Feeney[1,2]

[1]*School of Agriculture and Food Science, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin, Ireland,*
[2]*UCD Institute of Food and Health, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin, Ireland and*
[3]*Peacock Salt, Ayr, UK*

High salt intakes are commonly seen within the UK and Ireland, with the average UK adult consuming 8.4g/day[1], considerably higher than the recommended 6g/day[2]. The voluntary traffic-light labelling system was introduced as a 'consumer-friendly' form of labelling to assist consumers to make an informed decision on a food product, based on a simple, colour-coded system. This system categorises total fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt into red, amber or green categories depending on the amount of each in a food product and, for 'red' categories, also based on the portion size of the product[3]. This is one strategy introduced to help lower population salt intakes, along with consumer awareness and product reformulation, with set targets for salt contents[4].

The aim of this study was to examine salt levels in ready-meals across the UK and Ireland and calculate the reductions in salt that would be needed in these products to further reduce overall population salt intakes. A database (n = 215) of market-available ready-meals from major retailers across the UK and Ireland was created. Information was collected for each of the ready-meals, including: brand, product name, salt content, portion size, energy, as well as the main food source of the carbohydrate and protein. The data was used to categorise each meal into their respective 'traffic light' colour categories, and then calculations were carried out to assess the reduction levels needed in each of these meals. Categories used for analysis were brand, protein source and carbohydrate source.

From the ready meals in the sample, the majority contained higher than recommended salt levels, with 52% of these falling into the 'amber 'category, 35% into the 'red' category and only 13% into 'green'. In terms of protein sources, beef and fish-based products, on average, fell into the 'red' category. Brand had a major influence on salt levels in ready-meals, and in particular, reduced-calorie, 'weight-loss' branded meals were significantly high in salt, with 55% of all ready-meals in this category classified as 'red'. Based on the salt reduction targets set out for 2024, 98% of ready-meals surveyed met these targets, suggesting that scope remains for more ambitious salt-reduction targets to be introduced.

The majority of ready-meals surveyed here contained higher than recommended salt levels, especially those targeted at weight loss. This is a particular concern, given the consumer demographics for such products. Many ready-meals surveyed require only a small reduction to move down a traffic-light category, but food companies may need incentives to do this. The introduction of mandatory traffic-light labelling, and more ambitious salt reduction targets, may be one way to achieve population intakes of 6g/day.

References

1. *National Diet and Nutrition Survey Assessment of salt intake from urinary sodium in adults (aged 19 to 64 years) in England,* 2018 to 2019 (2020).
2. Food Standards Agency Ireland. *Salt and Health: Review of the Scientific Evidence and Recommendations for Public Policy in Ireland (Revision 1)* (2016) [Available at: https://www.fsai.ie/science_and_health/salt_and_health/the_science_of_salt_and_health.html]
3. Food Standards Agency. *Guide to creating a front of pack (FoP) nutrition label for pre-packed products sold through retail outlets* (2016).
4. Public Health England (2020). *Salt targets 2017: Second progress report 2020* [Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/915371/Salt_targets_2017_Second_progress_report_031020.pdf.]