

Australia urged to limit salt content in food, especially fast food and processed meats, to reduce intake

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AUSTRALIA has been urged to follow other countries and limit the salt content of foods to rein in high levels found particularly in fast food and processed meats.

Britain and the USA have introduced limits on salt in recognition of the pivotal role of dietary salt in community-wide rates of high blood pressure, stroke and heart disease, says Professor Bruce Neal. Prof Neal, senior director at the Sydney-based The George Institute for International Health, said Australia's efforts in comparison were "piecemeal and progressing too slowly".

"Target levels for salt in processed and take-away foods are urgently required," said Prof Neal, who is also chair of the Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH).

"Industry is crying out for a level playing field that everyone can work towards.

"They've shown this works in the UK, and New York City has just set targets that will be applied across the US."

Prof Neal said negotiations among overseas governments, industry and scientists had established maximum acceptable salt levels for more than 85 categories of processed and fast foods.

Industry was then bound to work towards achieving the targets over "typically a couple of years", Prof Neal said.

For the Australian government to not impose similar salt limits was "passing up one of the greatest public health opportunities in Australia", he said.

Most Australians eat eight to ten grams of salt a day but could live healthily on just one to two grams.

"There is overwhelming evidence that the current high levels of salt consumed in Australia cause high blood pressure, the leading cause of stroke and a major factor in heart disease," Prof Neal said.

There is also growing evidence this excessive intake can lead to stomach cancer, osteoporosis, obesity, kidney stones and kidney failure.

Research conducted by The George Institute, to be published this month in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, shows more than 70 per cent of processed meats, cheeses and sauces available in Australia contained "unacceptably high levels" of salt.

"Many people recognise that salt is bad for health and have stopped adding salt during cooking or at the table, but this will only get them so far," said lead researcher Jacqui Webster.

"With some three quarters of the salt we eat hidden in everyday foods such as bread, processed meat, and take-away foods, it is very hard to make the large reductions needed."

"Australia needs to set its own salt targets".

A recent US study also found that a reduction of three grams of salt per person per day would prevent the deaths of 92,000 Americans from related disease each year.