

Assault on Salt in Processed Meats

Media Release

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Less than 10% of processed meats in Australian supermarkets have acceptable salt levels, according to data released by The George Institute today.

The research examined salt levels in 552 processed meat products including bacon, sausages, deli meats, meat burgers, meat pies and canned meat. Only 5% of sliced sandwich meats and 3% of sausages met international benchmarks.

Report author Elizabeth Dunford, who will be presenting the findings at the Dietitians Association of Australia's 28th National Conference today, said "Excess salt is a leading cause of chronic disease in Australia. There is widespread recognition that the food industry needs to reduce salt in processed foods. This research highlights the importance of targeting processed meat products in the food supply."

In the UK and the USA, negotiations between government, industry and scientists have established maximum acceptable salt levels for more than 85 categories of processed and fast foods. The food industry in those countries has worked towards achieving these targets over an agreed timeframe, typically a couple of years. The Australian Government's *Food and Health Dialogue* recently set Australian salt targets for bread and breakfast cereals and is currently considering targets for processed meats.

Professor Bruce Neal, Senior Director at The George Institute for International Health says, "The *Food and Health Dialogue* has a real opportunity here. Processed meats are a major source of dietary salt and there is huge scope for reducing salt in these products. The Australian food industry must commit to targets that will deliver real change. Most Australians are eating 5-10 times more salt than they need, with serious consequences for their health. Three quarters of this salt comes from processed foods."

Professor Neal went on to say "At The George Institute we have set up a database that will enable monitoring of salt reduction commitments that come out of *The Food and Health Dialogue*. The Australian Food and Grocery Council has asked for the help of researchers in achieving its health goals. We will provide regular updates on what the evidence says should be done, what we are

actually achieving in Australia, how we stack up against other countries and how we can do better. We will also be tracking individual company progress in reducing salt in foods”.

There is overwhelming evidence that the current high levels of salt consumed in Australia result in high blood pressure, the leading cause of stroke and a major factor in heart disease. Most Australians eat 8-10g of salt a day but could live healthily on just 1-2g/day. Levels of salt in naturally occurring foods are very low but significant amounts are added during the manufacturing process.

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Notes to editors:

1. The Dietitians Association of Australia's 28th National Conference is being held in Melbourne 27th – 29th May 2010. Elizabeth Dunford will present on the sodium content of Australian processed foods on 29th May 2010.
2. To find out more about the UK Food Standards Agency salt reduction targets, see <http://www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2006/mar/salttargets>
3. To find out more about the New York City Salt Reduction Initiative see <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/pr2010/pr002-10.shtml>
4. To find out more about the Australian government's Food and Health Dialogue see <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/ministers/publishing.nsf/Content/mr-yr09-mb-mb030.htm>
5. The George Institute has established a database containing nutrient information for ~8,000 processed and fast food products that is used to monitor changes in product formulation over time.