

ADDRESSING SALT LEVELS IN THE OUT OF HOME SECTOR

Despite the popularity of food and drinks available in the Out of Home (OOH) sector in daily diets in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, generally there is a lack of data on the nutritional composition of these products. This is true in many countries worldwide, and so far, few countries have developed a strategy to reduce salt levels in the OOH sector, especially the informal OOH sector. Malaysia is in the early stages of implementing a salt reduction strategy for the OOH sector, and countries such as the UK have developed limited salt reduction targets for the OOH sector. However, due to the lack of nutrition data available for meals served in the sector, progress is difficult to monitor and the voluntary nature of the targets means compliance varies [1]. The knowledge and data gap on OOH food must be filled to design interventions to reduce their salt content.

From the outset, it is necessary to engage with all stakeholders operating in the sector as a whole – both the formal and informal sectors – to raise awareness of the impact salt has on health, along with reassurance that when done gradually, salt reduction does not lead to loss of sales.

- It will be easier to engage with the formal OOH sector, as they will already be engaging with local authorities on issues such as food safety. They are also likely to be represented by restaurant associations, who can be a useful first point of contact.
- The informal OOH sector presents more of a challenge as many are unregistered and unregulated. As such, innovative strategies are required to engage with them and include them in the wider conversation around health and food.

DEFINITION

The **Out of Home (OOH) sector** includes all outlets where food or drink is bought for immediate consumption or taken away and eaten at home or elsewhere, and can generally be divided into two sections:

- The **formal OOH sector**, which includes registered and licensed restaurants, cafes, fast food outlets, takeaways, work or school canteens, hotel restaurants, and delivery companies
- The **informal OOH sector**, which includes street food and market vendors, and informal food deliveries

Formal OOH Sector

Identify Sources of Salt

As a first step, conduct a survey to understand the sources of salt in population diets, to help define the scope of salt reduction work in the OOH sector. Please refer to the Assessing Sources of Salt protocol for more information. From this, high salt dishes to address will be identified – for example, are meals from fast food chains such as McDonald's commonly consumed, or are dishes from government cafeteria chains more prominent sources?

Gather Baseline Data

Data can be gathered directly from outlets or through direct chemical analysis.

- **Direct from Food Companies:** manufacturers may be able to provide data directly, which requires early engagement with companies to build trust. There may also be some existing data on the salt content of dishes in the sector, particularly from multinational fast-food outlets or when ingredients and other products have been purchased from wholesale distributors. Investigate company websites and ask nutrition teams directly for information.

- **Direct Chemical Analysis:** where information is not available, dishes can be purchased and sent to registered laboratories for analysis.

Data can be added to existing country food composition databases, or a new database can be created. Please see the Developing a Database for Salt Content Monitoring protocol for more information on creating a database.

Develop Salt Reduction Targets

Engagement with the sector to use less salt during cooking is essential to drive population salt intakes down and is best done through the setting of salt reduction targets, for the whole sector to work towards. Please see the Setting Salt Reduction Targets protocol for a detailed explanation of the process of setting salt reduction targets.

Monitor Progress

Targets would ideally be set to be achieved within 3-4 years and therefore monitoring should take place at the mid-point and at the end of the deadline. For more information, please see the Setting Salt Reduction Targets protocol.

Informal OOH Sector

As a first step, data is required to build a picture of salt levels in OOH food. From this data, salt reduction strategies can be developed, potentially involving targets; education interventions with chefs, cooks and vendors; and the potential use of low-sodium salt substitutes.

Gathering Baseline Data

There has been limited assessment of salt levels in out of home foods. However, in Morocco a pilot assessment of salt content of fast foods was conducted [2]. WHO Europe has also conducted preliminary analysis of salt levels in the OOH sector through their FeedCities project [3].

To gather essential baseline data, research should focus on larger cities with a larger concentration of outlets. It may be possible to get information of popular food outlets through key informant interviews or focus group discussions with food sector. Market research data may also be used to identify restaurants/food chains with multiple outlets. Laboratories are likely to be located in larger cities too, allowing for easy and fast transportation of samples to the laboratory for analysis.

Depending on focus of research (e.g., street food vendors, restaurants, fast food outlets), map out the outlets present in the city, noting name of outlet/vendor, location, set-up (e.g. stall, restaurant, café), type of food offered. Working with local authorities to gather this data is key, as they are likely to have a list of registered outlets. Outlets can then be randomly selected for analysis.

Following the sampling model utilised in the FeedCities project, 5-10 samples of the dishes of focus should be purchased from each outlet included in the survey, giving a total of around 300 samples from the city of focus. Salt content should be assessed via laboratory analysis.

Potential Interventions

Strategies to reduce salt intake must be tailored to local contexts, are likely to require collaboration across several stakeholder groups and will be dictated by resources available. As a general guide, the following strategies could be considered.

- For restaurant chains/formal outlets, discussion and consensus with representative associations using the evidence from analysis can lead to target setting for identified foods/dishes. Targets could be voluntary or mandatory. Discussions regarding salt reduction have started with the largest restaurant franchise operators in Kuwait [4]
- Implement legislation to limit the marketing and promotion of unhealthy foods like Qatar's proposed legislation that would ban children's toy incentives in fast food restaurants [5]
- Engage with Mayors and local authorities, empowering them to take charge and implement strategies to reduce salt levels in the sector and encourage them to establish simple procedures to register and license all street food vendors and hawkers
- Conduct small scale trials of salt reduction targets for popular meals and other products available in the OOH sector. Monitoring processes can be established by randomly selecting dishes for repeat analysis, tracking progress overtime. Salt targets can also aid the reformulation of base ingredients such as tomato pastes, which may be used by many chefs and vendors. Please refer to Setting Salt Reduction Targets for more information on the process of setting targets.
- Conduct trials of engagement activities with chefs, cooks and vendors – assess their KAP, and organise workshops or educational activities on how to reduce salt levels, run by their peers. Involve local authorities and representative associations in the design and conduct of these activities to increase likelihood of success.
- Approach high profile chefs and/or street food vendors and encourage them to be a voice for healthier food
- Consider small or largescale trials with vendors , giving them low-sodium salt substitutes and sauces to use in cooking and measuring the impact on overall salt content of the finished meals
- Incorporate health messaging into strategies to register informal retailers and provide licenses
- Encourage local authorities to develop a healthy eating awareness campaign, with materials such as posters and leaflets available to consumers in street food markets.

References

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