

Salt packets should carry tobacco-style health warning: Position statement

Afshan Yasmeen

BENGALURU, OCTOBER 08, 2019

The warning label should indicate that consumption of excess sodium is a health risk, according to the position statement in the Journal of Clinical Hypertension.

The statement requests that governments require health warnings on packages of sodium chloride (salt) sold for consumption and sodium dispensers

To reduce dietary salt intake, a position statement published earlier this week in the Journal of Clinical Hypertension suggests that salt sold in supermarkets for consumption and salt dispensers in restaurants should carry a front-of-pack, tobacco-style health warning.

This position statement requests that governments require health warnings on packages of sodium chloride (salt) sold for consumption and sodium dispensers. The warning label should be clearly visible and easily readable, indicating that consumption of excess sodium is a health risk and advising consumers to use less sodium.

In the statement, the authors have proposed a sample warning label: “Too much sodium in the diet causes high blood pressure and increases risk of stomach cancer, stroke, heart disease, and kidney disease. Limit your use.”

According to the lead author of the statement Norm Campbell, who is the former president of the World Hypertension League: “The World Health Organisation established a target for countries to reduce sodium intake by 30% by 2025, and governments and the food industry have been working together to reduce salt in processed foods. However, urgent action now needs to be taken to raise consumer awareness of these dangers.”

The statement has been endorsed by several leading international health organisations such as World Hypertension League, Resolve to Save Lives, World Health Organisation Collaborating Centre on Salt Reduction, The George Institute for Global Health, World

Action on Salt and Health (WASH), Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH), World Health Organisation Collaborating Centre for Nutrition, University of Warwick, Hypertension Canada, and the British and Irish Hypertension Society.

Major goal

In India, a major goal of the National Non-communicable Disease Action Plan of the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is to reduce use of salt by 30% by 2025 across India. The guidelines of the American College of Cardiology, followed by physicians worldwide, recommends not more than 1,500 mg of sodium a day, roughly 4-5 gms of salt.

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) does not currently require reporting of sodium content on pack. However, it has a proposal for making it mandatory for food products that are high on fat, sugar and salt content levels to display red-colour coding on their labels.

FSSAI Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Pawan Kumar Agarwal said FSSAI does not have any view on this now. "Tobacco-style health warning on salt packets is a new thought and FSSAI has not deliberated on this as yet," he said.

C.N. Manjunath, director of the State-run Sri Jayadeva Institute of Cardiovascular Sciences, said reading food labels is essential to choose food with low quantities of sodium. "In this context, health warning on salt packets and salt dispensers is advisable," he said. High blood pressure greatly increases the risk of stroke, heart attack and kidney failure. These are all now leading causes of death and disability in India, he added.

K.K. Aggarwal, who heads the Confederation of Medical Association of Asia and Oceania as well as Heart Care Foundation of India, said salt reduction is one of the most cost-effective, feasible and affordable strategies for cardiovascular disease prevention. "Both salt as well as white sugar need a tobacco-style health warning," he said.

'Indians eating more than double'

Indians are eating more than double the recommended amount of salt, putting themselves at increased risk of cardiovascular disease and early death, according to a 2016 study by the George Institute for Global Health.

Researchers reviewed data involving 2,27,000 people across the country and found salt consumption far exceeds the World Health Organisation (WHO) maximum target of less than five grams per person each day.

With salt being a major contributing factor to high blood pressure, a leading cause of cardiovascular disease, the study highlights the need for urgent action in India to reduce salt consumption.