

Salt consumption, poor diet leading to ‘storm’ of health issues

Calgary researcher pushes stroke prevention message

CALGARY-- Calgary physician and disease prevention guru Dr. Norm Campbell laughs when he's called a 'shaker' in the fight against salt.

But there's no denying that, in recent months, his campaign against the insidious white 'toxin' has made headlines across the country. Along with colleagues at the Canadian Stroke Network, he has lobbied to have Health Canada's dietary guidelines reflect the dangers of excessive sodium consumption, all the while preaching the benefits of healthy eating, exercise and blood pressure control.

Dr. Campbell, professor at the University of Calgary and Canadian Institutes of Health Research chair in hypertension prevention, is taking action against salt consumption and other modifiable lifestyle behaviours because he sees "a huge storm coming caused by poor diet, lack of exercise and sedentary lifestyle."

"One of the really sad things is that the food industry is putting a lot of things in the diet that are making Canadians unhealthy -- and it's only just starting to dawn on health-care professionals," says Dr. Campbell, a CSN investigator. "Diets are strong determinants of health and industry is unintentionally harming people."

Take, for example, a recent study released by World Action on Salt and Health that shows huge variations in the salt levels of the same food products in different countries. Some breakfast cereals, consumed in large quantities by Canadian children, contain up to 85 per cent more salt per serving than the same cereals purchased elsewhere. The impact: Irreversible damage to the body's blood vessels.

And, given current high consumption levels, most Canadians will develop hypertension, which is the leading risk factor for stroke and heart disease.

It is recommended that for adults an adequate consumption of sodium is 1300-1500 mg a day. However, Canadians, on average, eat about more than 3100 mg a day.

Dr. Campbell warns that government, health-care organizations and the food sector must join together to make changes now and that greater priority should be put on health promotion.

"It's an industrialized world issue," Dr. Campbell says. "We really need to develop environments that support healthy and long lives."

As it stands, the Calgary physician says that Western society is structured for unhealthy living. Driving is encouraged; vending machines and stores are filled with junk foods; and fruits and vegetables are often out of reach.

"The answer is very clear," Dr. Campbell says. "We need changes in our society; we need to educate people; and we need to ensure that healthy choices are easy choices."

Dr. Campbell is particularly concerned with high blood pressure because it "leads to as many as 70 per cent of strokes." He has already moved his concerns to action through his leadership of the Canadian Hypertension Education Program (CHEP), formed in 2000 as an effort to educate health-care professionals around evidence-based recommendations to improve the management of hypertension.

In six years, the impact has been "really remarkable."

"There has been a 60-per-cent increase in anti-hypertensive treatment, and a doubling in the rate of diagnosis and treatment of hypertension."