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Reductions needed in the sodium added to foods

*Lowering dietary salt intake would save lives, reduce medical costs,
health groups say*

OTTAWA, Oct. 25, 2007 – In an effort to save lives and reduce disability from stroke and heart disease, 17 of Canada’s leading health groups and professional associations today urged comprehensive action to reduce sodium levels in food.

“Increased blood pressure is the leading risk factor for death, causing most of the strokes and much of the heart disease our country faces,” says Dr. Norm Campbell of Blood Pressure Canada, who spearheaded development of a National Sodium Policy statement. “It is estimated that almost one in three Canadians who have hypertension would have normal blood pressure if there was less sodium in our food.”

Blood Pressure Canada, the Canadian Stroke Network, Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, Canadian Medical Association, Canadian Diabetes Association, Canadian Public Health Association and Dietitians of Canada are among signatories of the policy.

According to Statistics Canada, the average Canadian consumes in excess of 3,100 mg of sodium a day, the vast majority of which is hidden in processed foods. Health Canada and the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (Institute of Medicine) have determined that an adequate daily intake for a healthy adult is 1,200 mg to 1,500 mg of sodium. Research shows that lowering sodium consumption to optimal levels could reduce the incidence of stroke and heart disease by as much as 30 per cent.

“The individual can only do so much and now more food companies have to step up,” says Dr. Kevin Willis, Director of the Canadian Stroke Network. “If we discovered that a food additive was causing 30 per cent of all cancers, something would be done right away. The same action is needed with sodium to prevent stroke, heart disease and other vascular illnesses.”

Results from the 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey indicate that, among people ages 19 to 70, more than 85 per cent of men and 60 per cent of women consume well above the maximum daily level of sodium.

“While some companies have been leaders in reformulating their products, we still have a long way to go, and we have to start making significant reductions to get there,” says Sally Brown, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada.

Health groups applauded an announcement today by Minister of Health Tony Clement to establish an expert Sodium Working Group as a first step towards the development of a long-term national strategy to reduce dietary sodium levels.

“Cardiovascular diseases are the number one cause of death for Canadians, and sodium intake is one of the largest controllable factors that contribute to these diseases,” said Minister Clement. “Through the formation of this working group, our Government is taking a major step in helping Canadians improve their health, and the health of their families.”

According to recent research published in the *Canadian Journal of Cardiology*, excess dietary sodium causes hypertension in at least one million Canadians, resulting in \$430 million a year in direct health-care costs, Dr. Campbell says.

“In Canada, almost 46 per cent of women and 38 per cent of men over age 60 are taking costly antihypertensive medications,” says Dr. Campbell, who is CIHR Canadian Chair in Hypertension Prevention and Control. “A population-health approach to reducing dietary sodium is an appropriate strategy.”

The coalition of health groups wants to achieve the goal of getting Canadians within the healthy range of sodium intake by Jan. 1, 2020.

It is urging the federal government to:

- set graduated targets for sodium levels according to food categories;
- monitor and report on progress by 2012 and 2016
- establish effective monitoring systems to track sodium levels in the diets of Canadians
- educate Canadians on the health risks of high dietary sodium and how to reduce consumption
- provide incentives to the food industry
- ensure health professionals understand the need to reduce dietary sodium and educate their membership about health risks and how to reduce intake

The World Health Organization has called on governments to introduce regulations or strong policies on sodium additives to food and the U.K. has shown leadership on this issue with the development of a comprehensive food labeling system and lower sodium targets for food. “Canada needs to follow this lead and take action to reduce the sodium added to our food,” says Dr. Campbell, a professor of medicine at the University of Calgary.

Dr. Graham MacGregor of the U.K.-based World Action on Salt and Health (WASH) says that reducing dietary sodium would result in “the biggest improvement in public health since clean water and drains.”

Signatories to the National Sodium Policy statement include:

Blood Pressure Canada, Canadian Stroke Network, Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, Dietitians of Canada, Canadian Council of Cardiovascular Nurses, Canadian Cardiovascular Society, Canadian Medical Association, College of Family Physicians of Canada, Canadian Hypertension Society, Canadian Diabetes Association, Canadian Society of Internal Medicine, Canadian Pharmacists Association, Canadian Public Health Association, Canadian Society of Nephrology, Canadian Nurses Association and Canadian Heart Failure Network and Canadian Association of Cardiac Rehabilitation.

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