

Lebanon in need of a salt awareness campaign as per LASH's latest study

Excess intake of salt is responsible for over 680 deaths a year

- 84% of all deaths in Lebanon are due to non-communicable diseases.
- Preliminary results estimate the average salt intake to be 3130 mg of sodium in Lebanon with up to 60% of individuals consuming more than the recommended 2000 mg.
- Less than one quarter of the study population (21.5%) correctly identified the main contributors of salt in their diet.
- More than one third of the Lebanese population overlooks food content labels.
- The major food groups contributing to the Lebanese individual daily salt intake are bread, and bread-like products, pies or manaeesh (cheese or zaatar), as well other processed foods.

(March 13, 2014) Beirut, Lebanon - Over 680 deaths a year have been recorded in Lebanon as a result of excess intake of salt. Latest findings on the danger of excessive salt intake in the Lebanese population was revealed today, Tuesday March 11, 2014, by the Lebanese Action for Salt and Health (LASH) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and Consumers International (CI), in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health. A press conference held on the occasion of World Salt Awareness Week.

LASH, part of the Vascular Medicine Program (VMP) at AUBMC has conducted an in-depth research in the Lebanese market, considered to be the first of its kind in Lebanon, revealing tangible information around the dangers of excess salt intake and the burden it has on the medical sector and on the national budget.

“The findings were shocking and immediate action is needed,” said Dr. Samir Arnaout, facilitator of the Lebanese Action on Salt and Health (LASH) group, former president of the Lebanese Society of Cardiology (2011-2013). “LASH’s preliminary data estimated an alarming high average of salt intake at 7.8 g per day. The Lebanese community must work collectively hand in hand on a long term plan aimed at reducing this to normal levels at 5g per day through an organized national awareness campaign,” added Dr. Arnaout.

The research has shown that there is a minimal public understanding of the relationship between salt and health. Less than one quarter of the study population (21.5%) correctly identified the main contributors of salt in their diet. More than one third of the Lebanese population overlooks food content labels. “Improved labelling is an important part of the overall salt reduction strategy,” said Dr. Arnaout. Of those who do look at labels, two thirds never look at salt content. More alarmingly, two thirds admit the salt content on packaging doesn’t affect their decision to purchase the products. Around 31.8% of the Lebanese population mistakenly identified the major

source of salt as salt added during cooking, 42.1% as salt added at the table while the correct answer is processed foods.

By lowering salt intake immediately, death and disability from strokes and heart attacks will be reduced significantly. “Too much salt is bad for the heart; our salt consumption habits have to change and to achieve this several steps must to be taken,” said Dr. Zouhair Berro, president of Consumers Lebanon.

For consumers the best way to go about cutting down on salt is to begin by reading labels carefully and to become aware of salt content, tailoring shopping habits to lower it. The aim should be to reduce salt slowly and to look out for high-salt foods and purchase alternatives. In time the body will adjust and eating a healthy low-salt diet will become a way of life.

“Achieving a long and healthy life, free from disease, is a right for our community,” added Dr. Arnaout. “The solution is easy yet needs commitment. Educating the public is crucial to the success of the salt reduction program through mechanisms such as schools and professionals across the county, organizing awareness campaigns in the community, working with food manufacturers on reducing salt in processed food, and last but not least the support of media to spread the word on the WHO guidelines regarding the new parameters for salt intake and remind people of the dangers of salt.” said Dr. Arnaout.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends a population salt intake of less than 5 grams/person/day to be achieved by 2025. AUBMC and LASH’s study has set a platform for local policy makers and officials to work on setting new policies, implementing WHO guidelines in Lebanon, to reduce 10% of salt content in all types of bread by January 2014 and another 10% by December 2014.

An actual study and field test was conducted by LASH in Ras Beirut visiting food outlets and testing salt average in the food offered. The major food groups contributing to the Lebanese individual daily salt intake are bread (there are up to 500 mg of sodium per 100 g Arabic bread), and bread-like products, pies or manaesh (cheese or zaatar), as well other processed foods.

“The support of industry, public health and consumer stakeholders is a must for the success of any campaign,” commented Dr. Mohamed Sayegh, vice president for medical affairs and Raja N. Khuri dean of the Faculty of Medicine at AUBMC. “We thank LASH for their original role in developing another successful model of team work to create positive change for the health of our community. A new initiative solidifying AUBMC as pioneers in setting the way to raise awareness on issues related to public health.” added Dr. Sayegh.

Representing the Ministry of Public Health, Dr. Michel Kfoury commented, “The ministry has always been at the front line working relentlessly to improve public health. We admire the tremendous effort LASH has done in conducting this study, definitely an eye opener to think

collectively of the solutions and next steps to reduce salt intake. We thank AUBMC for being once again a key player in setting the platform to initiate national policies aiming at enhancing the public health and create awareness on diseases effecting the Lebanese population.”

Salt reduction initiatives have been very successful in the UK, France, Finland and the US and have resulted in a drop in stroke and heart attacks concomitant with a drop in salt intake levels in processed foods like bread. Internationally recognized guidelines state that any food with more than 600 mg of sodium per 100g can be considered unhealthy. In Lebanon, many products exceed this limit.

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Note to Editors

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Launched in 2010, the AUBMC 2020 Vision is an ambitious and comprehensive initiative that affirms AUBMC’s position as the leading medical center and healthcare institution in the region. The AUBMC 2020 Vision is transforming medical education, research and practice, and most importantly, medical care in the region, bringing them to new levels of excellence. It consists of major new medical (clinical and academic) facilities, the establishment of clinical and research centers of excellence, investment in state-of-the-art equipment, recruitment of talented physicians and nurses, and regional and international partnerships. Read more at www.aubmc.org/2020