

Sodium content of Australian bread products 2007-2010

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This document was prepared by researchers at The George Institute for Global Health

For further information please contact

Elizabeth Dunford

PO Box M201

Missenden Rd

Camperdown NSW, 2050

Australia

Phone: + 61 2 8507 2529

Fax: + 61 2 9993 4502

Email: edunford@georgeinstitute.org.au

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background - The Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) launched a campaign to reduce population salt intake in May 2007 and has been calling on the food industry to reduce salt in processed foods. The government's Food and Health Dialogue has since established a reformulation working group and has published sodium targets for bread and breakfast cereals. Bread products contribute significantly to salt in the Australian diet, accounting for about a quarter of salt intake in the Australian population.

Aim - The objective of this project was to examine changes in the sodium levels in Australian bread products using four years of data from a branded food composition database established and updated by AWASH from 2007-2010. Mean sodium levels in bread products were compared over time and between the major manufacturers. The proportion of breads meeting the sodium reduction target established by the Australian government's Food and Health Dialogue was also calculated.

Main results – There has been little change in the average salt content of Australian breads over the last four years. The key finds were:

- Overall average sodium levels in Australian bread products have not changed between 2007 (434mg/100g) and 2010 (436mg/100g)
- Less than a half of the bread products on Australian supermarket shelves currently meet the sodium target established by the government's Food and Health Dialogue
- Some manufacturers (George Weston Foods and Woolworths) are making significant improvements but others (Goodman Fielder and Bakers Delight) are going in the wrong direction
- The average sodium levels in Bakers Delight products stand out as being far above the others.

Conclusions – These data provide no evidence of a coordinated effort to reduce salt levels across the bread manufacturing industry. The efforts of one company are being offset by the inaction of another. These findings do not inspire confidence in the current approach to salt reduction in bread which relies upon voluntary action by industry. It is particularly concerning that despite the Food and Health Dialogue making salt reduction a priority and bread a first target, there appears to be little progress. If the voluntary approach advocated by industry and supported by government cannot deliver salt reduction then regulation will be required.

BACKGROUND

The Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) aims to reduce the average salt intake of the population to 6g per person per day over five years. Key to this is working with the food industry to achieve reductions in the salt content of processed foods. In order to establish a baseline from which any changes in the salt content of processed foods can be monitored, AWASH established a branded food composition database. Baseline figures for salt levels in food for 2008 were published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition in February 2010.ⁱ

The government's Food and Health Dialogue was established in March 2009 so that government, industry and public health groups could work collaboratively to address poor dietary habits and promote healthier food choices for all Australians. One of the key activities of The Dialogue is food reformulation, with a focus on reducing levels of risk-associated nutrients, such as salt, saturated fat, energy and sugar, and increasing beneficial nutrients such as fibre.

The Food and Health Dialogue identified salt reduction as a priority and breads and breakfast cereals as the initial target. The dialogue has published targets for salt levels for both these food categories.ⁱⁱ Round table meetings have been held with key players in these industries to implement a target-setting process.

ⁱ Webster J, Dunford E, Neal B. A systematic survey of the sodium contents of processed foods. Am J Clin Nutr. 2010;91:413-20

ⁱⁱ <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/food-health-dialogue>

OBJECTIVE

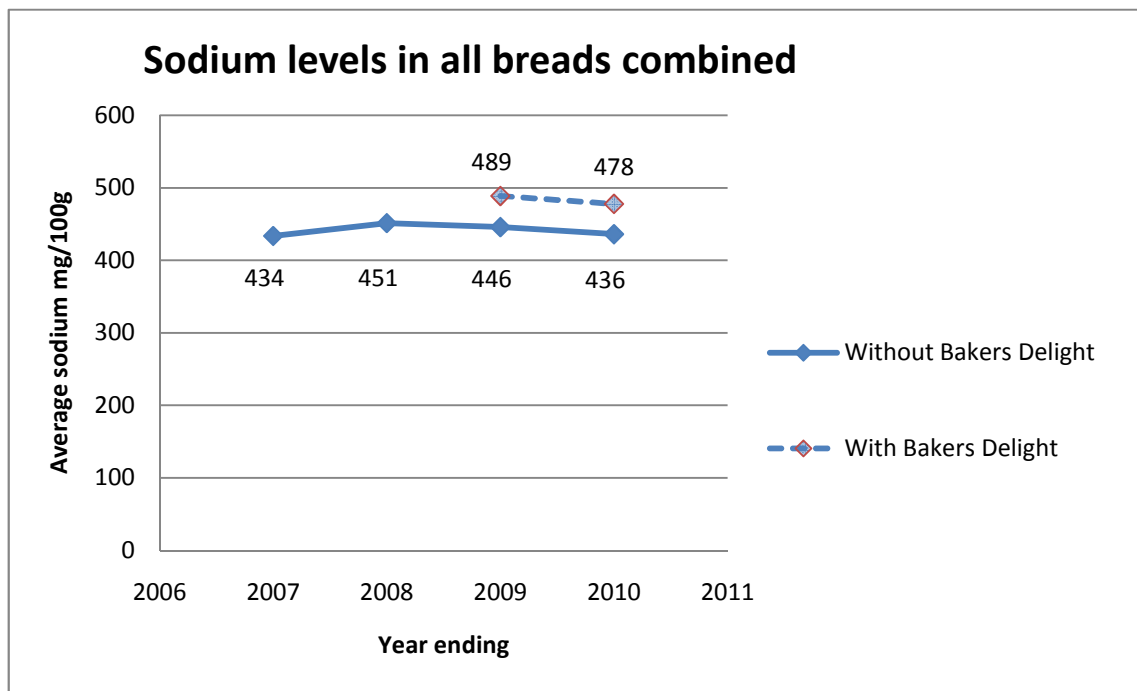
To evaluate progress towards the salt reduction targets for breads (400mg/100g) by calculating the mean levels of sodium in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 for Australian breads made by major manufacturers.

METHODS

Data was sought for as many Australian bread products as possible each year. There were three main sources from which data was obtained - (1) data provided direct by food processing companies (2) data extracted from company websites, and (3) data copied from the Nutrition Information Panels (NIPs) on product labels in-store at major Australian supermarkets. Where exactly the same food was presented in different packaging or different serving sizes only one entry was made in the database unless the product was marketed as a different brand and/or had varying sodium content. For each product, the brand name, product name, serving size and sodium level per 100g was recorded. Each bread product was assigned to one of the following three sub-categories; white, wholemeal or mixed grain/seed bread. In addition, breads were grouped by the five main manufacturers: Bakers Delight, Coles, Goodman Fielder, George Weston Foods and Woolworths. Data for Bakers Delight products were only available for 2009 and 2010. In each case average sodium levels were obtained by summing the sodium level per 100g for all breads and dividing through by the number of breads included.

RESULTS

Figure 1



The overall mean sodium levels in all bread products (white, wholemeal and seed/mixed grain combined) in Australia in 2010 are the same as they were in 2007. There is no clear trend in the data over these four years. Including data for Bakers Delight (which were available only for 2009 and 2010) substantially increased the estimated mean sodium levels in Australian breads.

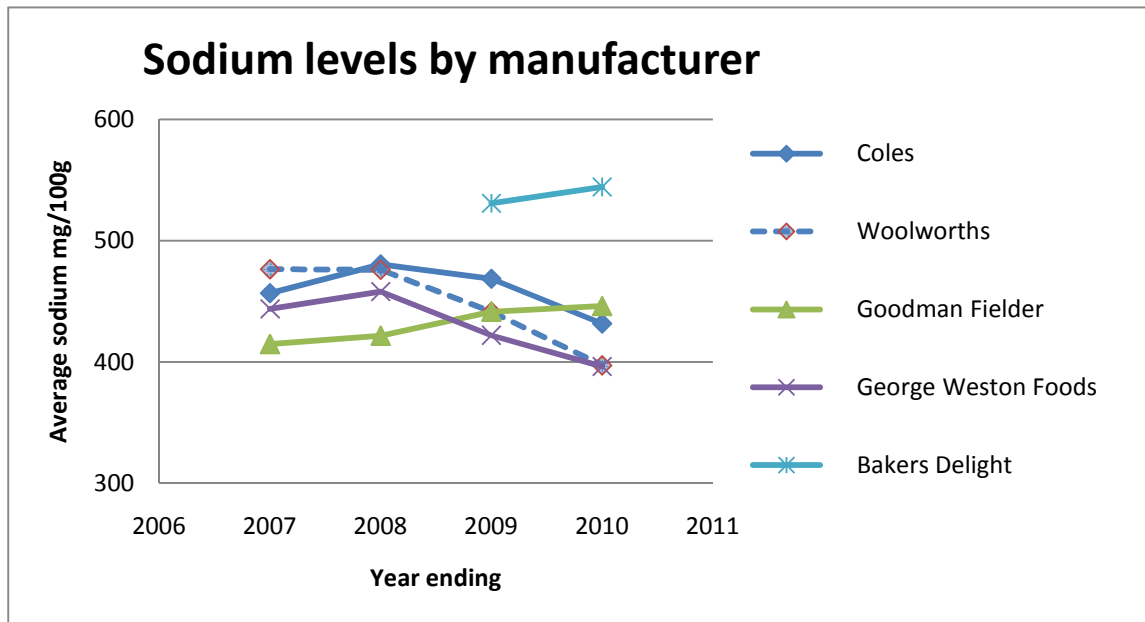
Table 1 - Proportion of breads meeting the 400mg/100g target by year

	Number of products	Mean sodium (mg/100g)	Min	Max	Number meeting target	% meeting target
2007	94	434	115	620	27	29
2008	136	451	235	804	30	22
2009 ^a	290	489	110	1050	103	36
2009 ^b	144	446	110	880	63	44
2010 ^a	165	478	212	968	62	38
2010 ^b	97	436	235	770	47	48

^a Including Bakers Delight, ^b Excluding Bakers Delight

The proportion of breads meeting the 400mg/100g target was 29% in 2007 and is 48% in 2010 (this was reduced to 38% when Bakers Delight breads were included).

Figure 2 – Average sodium levels in breads by manufacturer



Average sodium levels fell over the four year period for breads manufactured by George Weston Foods, Coles and Woolworths but rose for breads manufactured by Goodman Fielder and Bakers Delight.

Table 2 – Proportion of breads meeting the 400mg/100g target by manufacturer

	Proportion meeting target (%)			
	2007	2008	2009	2010
Bakers Delight	-	-	27	22
Coles	0	0	20	14
Goodman Fielder	44	40	28	21
George Weston Foods	19	14	71	96
Woolworths	0	0	88	100

The proportion of breads meeting the 400mg/100g target was 19% in 2007 and is 96% in 2010 for George Weston Foods, the best performing manufacturer. For Goodman Fielder, the worst performing, the proportion fell from 44% to 21%.

CONCLUSIONS

Average salt levels in bread products have not changed appreciably since 2007 despite the efforts of AWASH and the focus of the Australian government's Food and Health Dialogue on salt levels in bread. The problem seems to be that while some companies are making reductions others are making no effort to reduce sodium levels in their products or are actually increasing them.

Of the five major manufacturers highlighted in this report, four (George Weston Foods, Goodman Fielder, Bakers Delight and Coles) have made prior commitments to reducing salt levels in their product range at the request of AWASH. One has declined to make any commitment (Woolworths). It is encouraging to see Coles supermarkets and George Weston Foods willing to make commitments and to follow through on them. By contrast, it is very disappointing to see Bakers Delight and Goodman Fielder going in the wrong direction.

George Weston Foods, Goodman Fielder, Coles and Woolworths are all part of the Food and Health Dialogue salt reduction program for breads. As concerning as the absence of Bakers Delight from the process is the observation that Goodman Fielder, an apparently engaged partner, is going so clearly in the wrong direction. If The Dialogue is to be effective it must include all the major players and it must track and report what they are doing. If it cannot achieve that then a different process is almost certainly required. Voluntary programs and industry self regulation will only work and must only be accepted if they deliver. If they do not, there must be a clear path to regulation that can enforce change.

Bread is one of the largest contributors to Australian salt intake representing about 20% of daily salt intake from processed food. With most Australians eating 5-10 times more salt than the 1g/day required for good health there is an urgent need for action. Recent reports have highlighted the huge health gains that Australia could achieve from even moderate reductions in salt consumption and the very low cost at which these benefits could be achieved.ⁱⁱⁱ Continued inaction by industry is untenable and so to is the rather *laissez faire* approach being taken by the Australian government.

By way of comparison, the average sodium levels in bread products in the UK, which has implemented an effective industry-wide, government-supported salt reduction program is almost one fifth lower (397mg/100g in UK vs. 478mg/100g in Australia - personal communication Cliona Ni Mhurchu). The average Englishman is now consuming substantially less salt than he was five years ago and thousands of strokes heart attacks and deaths are being averted each year. It is unreasonable for Australians

ⁱⁱⁱ Assessing Cost-Effectiveness in Prevention report http://www.sph.uq.edu.au/docs/BODCE/ACE-P/ACE-Prevention_final_report.pdf

to be denied these same benefits simply because government and industry cannot implement proven, low cost strategies to control the huge quantities of salt added to processed foods.