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# Salt Skip News

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*The **business address** of the Salt Skip Program is Queensland Hypertension Association PO Box 193, Holland Park, QLD 4121, phone (07) 3899 1659, FAX (07) 3394 7815.*
Use the **academic address** when writing about **salt control**—see the panel on page 4.

## Is iodised salt obsolete now?

Australians are being told to buy iodised salt at a time when a lot people have already stopped buying any kind of salt References on page 4

The World Health Organisation sponsors two public health campaigns that badly need a common message.

One wants to reduce the excess salt in the diet of industrial societies while the other is still promoting iodised salt.

There is plenty of published evidence that the existing use of salt is a health hazard, especially for children.

### 1. Children and salt

Last year the Blood Pressure Unit at St George's Hospital, London, headed by Professor Graham MacGregor, published a meta-analysis of 13 trials of the effect of salt on the rise of children's blood pressure with age [1].

It included trials showing that the effect starts in early infancy, for example in 1983 when bottle feeds had the salt content of cow's milk (four times higher than the salt in human breast milk) a controlled trial found the average blood pressure was 2 mm Hg higher in bottle-fed infants than in breast-fed infants.

Food regulations in most countries now limit the salt content of bottle feeds to that of human breast milk.

In children of all ages up to 16 the story is the same—more salt, higher blood pressure.

Higher blood pressure is likely to track into later life, and there can be no question that a lower blood pressure will give children a better start in life.

### 2. Children and iodine

Every human population needs a steady supply of enough iodine for normal health throughout life, but surveys of schoolchildren have revealed significant iodine deficiency for the first time in most parts of Australia, and an iodine supplement is being proposed for the whole Australian population.

Children have the greatest need, as their brains are still developing. Swelling of the thyroid gland (goitre) is largely a thing of the past, but the big worry of the 21st century is the brain's need for iodine. From conception to the end of adolescence all children need enough iodine for normal brain development.

Every Australian who buys salt is currently being advised to make sure it is iodised salt.

The iodine campaign wants people who add salt to food to change over to iodised salt for health reasons, and especially make sure their children have iodised salt.

But should parents ignore the opposite advice, which is based on equally compelling health reasons, to cut down—or preferably stop—adding any salt to their food, and especially their children's food?

(Continued on page 2)

# Salt was 'good for you' in the 19th century

They thought it was harmless—even necessary—to add salt to food

High blood pressure was a fact of life in the 19th century and a normal part of growing old. They assumed that a higher blood pressure was a necessary adaptation to the more rigid arteries of older people.

A normal blood pressure was '100 plus your age', and 180 was 'normal' at age 80.

Iodine and salt were both 'good'—essential for life—especially in hot weather. Only now do we see how well the Aboriginal population have thrived for millennia in tropical Australia with no added salt [2].

The 19th century made iodised salt for districts where cases of goitre revealed regional iodine deficiency.

Today we still know that salt is essential for life but we notice that babies get all the salt they need for perfect health and rapid growth from breast milk, without adding a single grain of factory salt from a packet.

In the 'salt free' societies everybody grows up without using any added salt (they have no access to it), and most people have the blood pressure of a fit teenager (100/60) in old age, along with legendary fitness and stamina.

But in the 19th century nobody knew that. Supermarkets had not yet replaced grocers, and salt was still added mainly in the kitchen and at the table.

## Salt in the 20th century

The food industry has found a dozen reasons for adding salt, in amounts limited only by the needs of food technology.

By 1984 a very accurate study using salt fused with 1% lithium carbonate found that salt had reached unprecedented dominance in processed foods. Families living in modern industrial societies now obtained:

- 10% of their salt from the natural salt content of the food;
- 15% from cooking and table salt;
- 75% from salt added to processed foods in the factory [3].

Only 15% of the salt consumed in 1984 was salt that anybody could see and control. This inspired a dozen hypertension specialists in Britain to form CASH (Consensus Action on Salt and Health), to lobby the food industry to make a gradual reduction.

The last few decades of the 20th century had seen a massive international consensus that hypertension and other salt-related health problems caused or aggravated by salt were largely preventable.

CASH persuaded the food industry to give the whole population a healthier salt intake by making slow and gradual reductions that nobody would notice.

Meanwhile a survey showed how well the international consensus had reached the public in Hobart—over 50% of both men and women reported in 1995 that they 'seldom or never' used either cooking or table salt [4].

They applied the new health message to the salt they could see, but still knew little about the overload of salt in processed foods.

CASH has given birth to WASH (World Action on Salt and Health) and now AWASH (Australian Division of WASH).

## Salt in the 21st century

It is common knowledge in public health that governments can safely follow if a community group shows the necessary leadership.

The British government has now followed CASH's lead, and the government of Ireland followed soon afterwards.

But Australia has an iodine campaign that tells people salt is good if it is iodised.

## This confuses the Australian public

The announcer opened an ABC Television program on iodine in 2007 with this alarming statement:

> 'For years we've been told that too much salt is bad for us, and that is true. But now there's a new public health campaign about how a certain kind of salt is essential, especially for children'.

ABC reporter Mike Sexton tried to correct it with a clarification:

> 'Those advocating iodised salt are quick to point out that they aren't endorsing extra salt being added to food, merely switching to iodised salt.'

# Problems of shop-bought iodised salt

But switching to iodised salt is a problem for everybody—both for people who no longer cook with salt or add it at the table, and for people who still do.

- the first group must either forfeit the iodine supplement or go back to using cooking and table salt again. They only get iodine if they re-educate their palates to accept a higher salt intake again after developing a dislike for it [5];
- the second group is rewarded with iodine for having done nothing about their salt intake, and the iodine gives them a health reason to *continue doing nothing about their salt intake*.

It is only the shop-bought iodised salt that causes a problem (and at present it happens to be the only iodised salt available).

Just when the message is sinking in that salt is bad for you, customers are being sent to buy iodised salt to get a special additive that they are being told they need.

Shop-bought iodised salt keeps the palates of parents and children permanently adapted to the taste of added salt.

The iodine forces them to continue—they would get less iodine if they reduced their salt intake.

'Choice' magazine notes that children who eat unsalted peanut butter (sodium 10 mg/100g) don't like salted peanut butter (which has sodium over 500 mg/100g).

It should be obvious that children need to keep the natural palates they were born with, and not be made to tolerate added salt just for the sake of its artificial iodine content, leading to a preference for more salt, making healthier foods 'tasteless' by comparison.

## Universal salt iodisation (USI)

For decades, processed foods will give the population more salt than it needs, and the government is under pressure to legislate for mandatory iodisation of all edible salt. But USI would only be acceptable as an interim measure [6], and FSANZ (Food Standards Australia New Zealand) finds USI too trade restrictive and technically difficult, and has identified no population measure (including USI) that would meet the needs of pregnancy and lactation without risking overdose in young children.

. If bread is iodised, FSANZ reports that 'the majority of the population will receive sufficient additional iodine, including the majority of children and women of child-bearing age' [7].

The whole point is this: If mass distribution of iodine can give the public all the iodine it needs (supplemented if pregnant or breast-feeding), it follows **that the public no longer needs shop-bought iodised salt.**

Iodised salt has no use in pregnancy or breast-feeding—the iodine content varies too much (25–65 mcg/gram)—as iodine is simply sprayed on salt as it passes by on a moving belt. Other supplements give mothers both iodine and folic acid in accurate doses.

It has been argued that vegans—who avoid fish, milk and other dairy produce—would need shop-bought iodised salt. But that is untrue as there are better alternatives. Potassium iodide is cheap and abundant—alone and in various branded products—and you don't have to buy it attached to salt.

## Buying iodine without salt

- about a dozen brands of vitamin and mineral supplements have an adequate iodine supplement;
- the Tasmanian government gave all schoolchildren potassium iodide tablets in the 1960s and you can buy two brands;
- you can buy potassium iodide solution across the counter and by mail order as 0.4% drops for use in breadmakers to make your own iodised bread [7];
- iodised water (Trade Mark I-CON) is supplied by 4 New Elements Pty Ltd [8].

Why should shoppers spend money on a mixture of iodine with salt that no longer contributes to the iodine campaign and only damages the salt campaign?

### THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CONSENSUS

THE FUTURE: When Australians receive mass distribution of iodine the two campaigns could agree to stop recommending iodised salt.

THE PRESENT: Meanwhile it would be even better if both sides could agree **NOW** to stop promoting iodised salt and tell people instead *how to buy iodine **without** salt*.

(References are on page 4)

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Salt Skip Program
academic address
GPO Private Bag 23,
Hobart, TAS 7001
Australia

PHONE:
61-3-6226-7708

FAX:
61-3-6226-7704

email
saltmatters@utas.edu.au

We are on the Web at
www.saltmatters.org

Salt Skip News will continue to be distributed in hard copy in The BP Monitor (QHA newsletter)

# The SMANZ Information disc

If you are not already a member of SMANZ you can join by visiting www.saltmatters.org and clicking **EMAIL DISCUSSION GROUP**, where you will find an invitation to join (free of charge) an email group that shares news, shopping information and all the practical help, hints and tips you could possibly wish for if you are trying to control your salt intake.

SMANZ's full name is Salt Matters—Australia New Zealand. We needed an ambitious name to match the ambitious project we have just completed—a handful of multi-skilled members has created a dual-purpose disc that a GP could prescribe to a patient for treating a salt-related health problem. It is two discs rolled into one:

- a CD-ROM (Compact Disc-Read Only Memory) full of handouts that can be downloaded and printed with a computer;
- an SVCD (Super Video Compact Disc) that shows an audiovisual presentation on a TV set with a compatible DVD player.

We had a heated debate on whether we should include an item of lower quality than the CD-ROM—the SVCD is only a first draft with an unrehearsed and unedited commentary. We decided to use it because viewers hear in 30 minutes such a lot they need to know, with clear pictures. Professional versions will follow, and this is a preview.

The Meniere's Support Group of Victoria takes enquiries and orders for the disc at info@menieres.org.au or phone (03) 9783 9233, mail 4/18–28 Skye Road, FRANKSTON VIC 3199.

# Last issue of Salt Skip News?

Trevor Beard is making No 150 (this one) his last issue of Salt Skip News, due to advancing age and the backlog of work for other publications, especially the website. A new editor in 2008 could return us to the useful content of recipes, shopping and cooking hints and tips that filled the first 35 issues in the 1980s, when this newsletter was called NoSal News. Anybody who would like more information can use the contact details in the left-hand panel on this page.

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8. www.saltmatters.org. (click on IODINE).
9. www.4newelements.com.au.

***BP Monitor with Salt Skip News*** is published every 2 months, from February to December (6 issues a year).

***Salt Skip Editorial Committee:*** Assoc Prof Michael Stowasser (Head, Hypertension Unit, University Dept. Medicine, Princess Alexandra Hospital, Brisbane), Sister Dianne Robson (Hypertension Nurse, Hypertension Unit, Greenslopes Private Hospital, Brisbane), Prof Tony Worsley (Public Health Nutrition, Deakin University), Prof Caryl Nowson (Nutrition & Ageing, Deakin University), Clare Rawcliffe (Cardiology Dietitian, St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney), Dr Malcolm Riley (Honorary Fellow, Baker Heart Research Institute), Jane Brown (Home Economist, Salt Skip Program, Hobart). Text drafted (edited where other authors are named) by Dr Trevor Beard (Honorary Senior Research Fellow, Menzies Research Institute, Hobart). Printed by Snap Printing, Edward Street, Brisbane.