

Most people know the risks associated with a diet high in sodium chloride, but cutting back may be harder than you think

CONCORD, New Hampshire: When it comes to seasoning food, there is no shortage of salt options.

But when it comes to health, it does not matter if it was mined in Kansas, solar-evaporated from the Mediterranean Sea or hand-harvested in French marshes. Salt is salt, the experts say, and it is bad for your health. Chances are you are eating way too much of it.

If you think setting down the shaker will make a difference, take that advice with a grain of salt. Most salt comes from processed foods and restaurants.

Here is what is known. For good health, most people need less than a quarter-teaspoon a day of salt — a natural mineral known as sodium chloride. Of course, except for medically supervised diets, it is almost impossible to consume that little.

In fact, many foods exceed that amount per serving. Most Americans consume as much as two teaspoons (10 millilitres) of salt a day, far above the recommended half-teaspoon (2.5 millilitres) for healthy adults, according to the Institute of Medicine.

That is a serious problem. Though the mechanism behind it is not fully understood, high-salt diets can cause high blood pressure, a risk factor for heart and kidney disease and strokes.

"This is the equivalent of a jumbo jet with 400 people on it crashing every day," said Dr Stephen Havas, vice president of public health for the American Medical Association. He said if Americans cut their salt use in half, 150,000 lives a year could be saved.

Do not think that having normal blood pressure exempts you. Because blood pressure naturally rises



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Too much salt, not enough understanding

with age, people become increasingly susceptible to the ill effects of salt. Many researchers also think salt has a cumulative effect, triggering problems after years of overuse.

The good news is that much of the damage is reversible simply by cutting back on salt. The bad news? "Reducing your salt doesn't necessarily reduce your blood pressure to normal," said Dr Jeffrey Cutler, senior adviser at the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. "If you have hypertension, most likely you will need some medication."

So what should you do about it? Start by understanding the source of the salt.

Health officials are not concerned about the dash in your pasta

cooking water or the sprinkle on your scrambled eggs. Salt added at the table or during cooking accounts for less than a quarter of the sodium in the American diet.

It is processed and restaurant foods that are the problem.

For perspective, a McDonald's Quarter Pounder with Cheese contains nearly half a teaspoon (2.5 millilitres) of salt, while two slices of Pizza Hut Meat Lover's Stuffed Crust pizza has more than a teaspoon (5 millilitres). Even most low-sodium canned soups contain nearly a quarter-teaspoon (1.25 millilitres).

And taste is not always a good indicator. A serving of Cheerios has more salt than a serving of Ruffles potato chips.

Because processed and restaurant foods dominate the American diet, it can be hard to cut back — unless you eat out less and buy fewer processed foods.

Government regulation

Health officials are not waiting for that to happen. That's why they think change hinges more on the food industry than the consumer.

"You don't have to ask people to do anything," said Dr Norman Kaplan, a blood pressure expert at University of Texas Southwest Medical Center in Dallas, "if you could get the food processors to do it."

That is a big if. Advocacy groups, such as the Center for Science in the Public

Interest, for years have pushed the government to regulate salt, put warning labels on high-sodium foods and devise a programme for gradual reductions in restaurant and processed foods. To no avail.

Salt is classified "generally recognized as safe" by the Food and Drug Administration, which said it prefers a voluntary, industry-led approach to reductions. Industry and government officials also said consumers can make healthy choices using existing nutrition labels.

Recently, the debate intensified. The American Medical Association joined the push in June, urging the government to require labelling of high-salt foods, and called on the processed food and restaurant

industries to cut salt levels by half during the next decade.

The group also asked the government to revoke salt's status as "safe."

So far, the government — which last year issued new dietary guidelines urging Americans to eat less than a teaspoon of salt, about 100 milligrams less than the previous guidelines — has not committed either way. Officials said they are considering the best way to examine the issue.

Salt alternative

To its credit, the food industry has worked to find a low-sodium salt alternative — which it calls the Holy Grail of food processing — and many companies have

introduced lower-sodium products, or quietly lowered the salt in existing foods.

But salt is hard to replace. Besides enhancing other flavours, it also trains the palate, leaving unsalted foods tasting bland. As a result, low-sodium products remain a minority and most salt substitutes have disappointed.

Blame for that is shared, said Alison Kretzer, nutrition director for the Grocery Manufacturers Association. She said consumers have spurned many low-sodium products and the government has not done enough to fund research into salt alternatives.

Of course, industry fear and reluctance have a role, too. Salty foods drive beverage sales, so many companies stand to lose from low-salt foods. Meanwhile, food processors worry that lowering the salt in their products will push consumers to competitors.

In the United Kingdom, that fear was addressed by a government-led campaign to cut salt across the food industry. Already, salt in breads and soups is down 30 per cent. The goal is to lower total sodium consumption to a teaspoon (5 millilitre) a day by 2010.

The salt cutbacks are staggered at 10 per cent a year, so most consumers apparently do not notice.

But that is a cut Richard Hanneman, president of the Salt Institute, said is unnecessary. His group represents the United States' US\$242 million food salt industry, and is critical of efforts to lower salt intake.

Hanneman said science has established no link between a reduced salt diet and improved health. He also said that even doctors disagree on what amount is safe.

Havas contends the science on salt is clear — and it is bad.

Like so many Americans, Kathryn Starratt, a 56-year-old social worker from Hopkinton, New Hampshire, acknowledges that. And ignores it.

Despite taking medicine for high blood pressure, Starratt loves salt. She lives on processed foods, estimates adding at least a teaspoon of salt to each meal, has never tried to cut back, and has no plans to do so.

"I quit smoking. I lost weight. I got divorced. It's the only thing I have left and you want to take that, too?" she said.

Agencies

Doctor brings glimmer of hope to rural blind

By Wu Yong

According to Chinese tradition, there are three most-respected charitable behaviours: building bridges, patching roads and curing the blind. Dr He Wei has chosen the last one as his life-long career.

But this Shenyang native's goal is not only to help patients in the city, but also all those who have been or will be haunted by eye disease in China.

"What I want to do is very simple — that is to let patients, especially the poor, enjoy high-quality and affordable health services," said He.

This task is not simple. Statistics show that 6.7 million people suffer from blindness in China, and this figure grows by 6 per cent each year. Cataracts are the main cause of blindness, responsible for 40 to 70 per cent of cases.

"It is not only about the patient himself but the whole family," said Tan Leshan, director of Orbis China. "In the countryside, one blind family member may result in the whole family's poverty."

He's solution to eye disease is to push forward VISION 2020, the right-to-sight project, in China.

VISION 2020 is a global initiative that aims to help eliminate avoidable blindness by the year 2020.

It was jointly launched by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness

(IAPB), together with more than 20 international non-governmental organizations involved in eye care and the prevention and management of blindness.

WHO experts claim that 60 per cent of blindness could be cured and 20 per cent could be avoided.

"The key point does not lie on whether our government can afford the investment on the blindness prevention projects," said He.

"The question is, if we do nothing at the moment, the economic and social burden will increase dramatically and will be hard for all to bear."

But most eye patients are in the countryside, and have few medical resources.

He wants to restore the former three-level health network in provinces, cities and counties, which was first developed in the 1960s, following instructions by Chairman Mao Zedong.

Prevention is the key. "Prevention is always the most cost-effective investment way against disease," said He.

Early interest

He's interest in ophthalmology dates back to the year when he was still in the first grade of primary school, when a pretty classmate lost her sight and disappeared from his life.

"I told my parents I wanted to be an eye doctor," he said. "It was a naive and simple idea, but it stayed with me."

This seed in He's childhood grew quietly and finally blossomed when he met the person who would become his tutor in Japan. This Japanese professor, Dr Matsui Takao, helped him make the decision.

Dr Matsui, a private ophthalmologist and millionaire, was initially surprised by He's idealistic decision to return to China. "My thinking changed,"



Doctor He Wei talks with patient Feng Shulan, 102, who had free cataract surgery in He Eye Hospital two years ago.

COURTESY OF HE EYE HOSPITAL

recalled He. As a surgeon, one doctor can only do so much, maybe 3,000 or 4,000 surgeries a year. But to really have an impact, one could train many young doctors with skills that fit the country's situation.

"At some point you come to see it as a duty, a responsibility — your life's work is to prevent blindness, because you are needed. You feel a kind of happiness and satisfaction."

Decade of efforts

Since its foundation, the He Eye Hospital Group has offered free eye-health screenings for more than 500,000 people, with over 30,000 free cataract surgical operations performed in villages and towns all over Liaoning Province.

Every year, He Eye Hospital performs more than 10,000 surgeries; more than one-third are free or at lowered cost, totalling more than 30 million yuan (US\$ 3.75 million) in reduced or waived expenses.

The hospital also dispatches more than 10 million pieces of literature for free, generally aiming at popularizing eye-health care and its importance, and freely provides public lectures and consultations, benefiting more than 10 million people in the process.

He has been consulting the Liaoning government as it develops its programme under Vision 2020, and forwarded a strategy plan for implementing a cataract-free province.

"As a private, non-governmental hospital, we can do all the things that a public hospital can do, and can even do them much better," He said.

"In fact, what I do now is to follow Chairman Mao's call, to serve farmers and citizens."

'Lifespans soon to be decades longer'

LONDON: The science of anti-ageing is likely to achieve major breakthroughs in coming decades that will sharply increase life expectancy, a leading British academic predicts.

By as early as 2036, the average lifespan in the developed world may be decades longer than it is now, Cambridge-based biomedical gerontologist Aubrey de Grey told Reuters in a recent interview.

If rejuvenation therapies applied to laboratory mice can be translated to humans by then, he said, a 55-year-old person might be able to expect to live another 60 years or so, although he declined to make exact predictions.

That figure compares with measurements in 2004, when the average British male who lived to 65 could expect to reach 84, according to the Government Actuary's Department.

De Grey said decades-longer lives may change traditional patterns of family life, careers, retirement, education and child-raising and force radical changes to pensions.

"These are things that people with expertise with financial planning need to take on board now. Industry has been taking for granted that if state pension ages change at all, it will be only

by a small amount," he said.

Life expectancy has risen sharply in Britain. On average, a man aged 65 could expect to live for another 12 years in 1950. This is expected to rise to 21.7 years by the middle of the century, according to Government Actuary's Department figures in a report cited by the Pension Commission panel of experts.

Life expectancy is higher for women but is increasing at a slower pace, the panel said.

Private and state pension systems are already creaking under the impact of an ageing population and a declining birth rate. British companies have cut pension benefits and shut pension plans to new recruits.

On Wednesday, consultants Lane Clark & Peacock said the total pension deficit of FTSE 100-listed companies fell only slightly in 2005 from 2004, despite the rising value of equities, in part because of expected rising longevity.

Fact or fiction?

Ultra-long lifespans are so far the stuff of science fiction, such as in Robert A. Heinlein's novel "Time Enough for Love," in which people live for hundreds of years.

But it is no longer just a dream

that people may live decades longer than they do now, de Grey said.

The gerontologist said that while some people are sceptical, or even hostile, to the idea that the average lifespan will lengthen, scientific advances are likely to make this a reality.

As a result, lifestyles will change. People may increasingly retire from full-time work for several years, go to college and later re-enter the job market, he said.

The prospect of a longer life may affect peoples' willingness to take on risks such as serving in the army or practising extreme sports, he said.

"Longevity risk" — the chance that people live longer than experts expect — is now a regular topic in the pension industry because this risk is considered difficult to plan for.

Corporate pension funds have been turning to cutting-edge tools such as swaps to hedge risks on their portfolios, but to date coping with the risk of a higher-than-expected lifespan has proven a tough challenge for pension funds.

This risk was dubbed "the next big frontier for financial markets" by Professor Andrew Cairns of Edinburgh's Heriot-

Watt University in a speech last year.

People also underestimate how long they will live, bringing the risk that they do not save enough money for retirement, according to a study by the University of Nottingham last year.

Obesity task

De Grey is editor-in-chief of peer-reviewed science journal Rejuvenation Research and has lectured to groups including Britain's Institute of Actuaries.

He became interested in the subject of anti-ageing in the early 1990s and said he had been surprised to find that few biologists were investigating the topic.

"I like to do things where I can make a difference in the world, and this was clearly the biggest possible difference."

Some researchers say, however, that the trend toward longer a longer lifespan may falter due to rising obesity levels in some nations.

Researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago say that within 50 years, obesity will have shortened the US average lifespan of 77.6 years by at least two to five years, according to a report on cnn.com in March last year.

Agencies

HEALTHTIPS

Occasional junk food is 'good for your brain'

Continuing on from last Wednesday, here are four more ways to give your grey cells a boost.

1. Don't skip breakfast

When the exam results of 500 schoolchildren were analyzed at the University of Israel, it was found that those who had eaten cereal on the morning of the exam had better results than those who ate nothing.

A more substantial breakfast of grilled bacon and eggs seemed to have an even more positive effect.

2. Get more iron

Inadequate levels of iron are known to cause a drop in concentration and energy.

When Dr Michael Nelson of the department of nutrition at King's College London looked at the scores in verbal, reasoning and memory tests of 140 schoolgirls, he found that those whose diets were high in iron had higher IQs and performed significantly better in cognitive assessments.

"Our results firmly indicated that poor iron status in adolescent girls has a detrimental effect on their academic performance," Nelson

said. "By supplementing their diets with extra iron, it is quite probable that cognitive function would improve."

While supplements may be prescribed by a doctor if iron levels are too low, a diet packed with iron-rich foods will help. Red meat, leafy green vegetables, fortified breakfast cereals, sardines and eggs are good sources.

3. Have a bit of what you fancy

Researchers in the United States recently suggested that junk food boosted performance in tests.

A study of schoolchildren at the University of Florida found that those who ate lunch consisting of foods such as hot dogs, chocolate drinks, pizzas and biscuits recorded an improvement in test results.

Professor David Figlio and his colleagues looked at schools where pupils traditionally struggled to achieve high grades for the paper published in the British Journal of Public Economics.

When a pre-exam fast-food lunch containing 8 per cent more calories than usual was provided, the subjects scored an average 7 per

cent higher grades in maths and history and a 4 per cent improvement in English.

"We are certainly not recommending junk as brain food — but just for test day, it can help get scores up," Figlio said, adding that the approach "is a bit like loading on carbohydrates for athletes."

4. Get moving

A study of secondary school pupils found that those who exercised regularly performed better in exams and tests of mental agility. Researcher Angela Balding, of the University of Exeter's health education unit, tested more than 1,400 schoolchildren and found sport or physical activity boosted academic success.

"We found a definite link between those youngsters who were active three or four times a week and those who did better in the classroom," Balding said. "One theory is that the kids who are more active get more oxygen to their brains more often. As a result, their brains could be more receptive to learning new information and retaining it."

The Guardian