

EU FRAMEWORK FOR NATIONAL SALT INITIATIVES

Background

At the Council meeting on 7 December 2007, the Council welcomed the proposal contained in the White Paper on A Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related health issues for Member States to consider salt reduction as a first priority for discussion within the High Levels Group. At High Level Group meetings a number of Member States expressed their interest to start to work together on salt reformulation in line with the White Paper. Based on the results of two salt expert meetings and the discussions in the High Level Group in 2008 this EU Framework for National Salt Initiatives was developed describing a common vision for a general European approach towards salt reduction.

Why a European framework?

The overall goal of the EU framework on salt reduction is to contribute towards reduced salt intake at population level in order to achieve the national or WHO recommendations. Data from Member States bring to light that the current salt intake levels are clearly exceeding the WHO maximum limit of 5 g per day. A high salt intake is among the factors increasing the risk to develop certain chronic diseases. In some Member States the current national data basis may be insufficient to judge the magnitude of the problem. In other cases, national data might show that the population salt intake is close to the WHO recommended maximum level. To consolidate the mapping of the situation, it is possible for Member States to carry out 24h urinary sodium excretion surveys. However, even if the data picture is not fully clear yet, engaging in salt reduction is seen as a 'no regrets' move.

Participation of Member States in this common framework is entirely voluntary. Participating countries can work within the framework as a large group towards this common goal. It should support and reinforce national plans, as it will enable comparison of progress across the EU while maintaining flexibility for Member States to shape their national approaches to salt reduction. The framework will enable to give coordinated messages for reformulation of food products to the industry across Europe and help to generate momentum and measurable action. Focussing on salt reduction should not distract from the attention given to nor the efforts put into product reformulation in order to change the content of other nutrients in foods, such as reducing the content of total fat, saturated fatty acids, trans-fatty acids or sugars.

General Principles

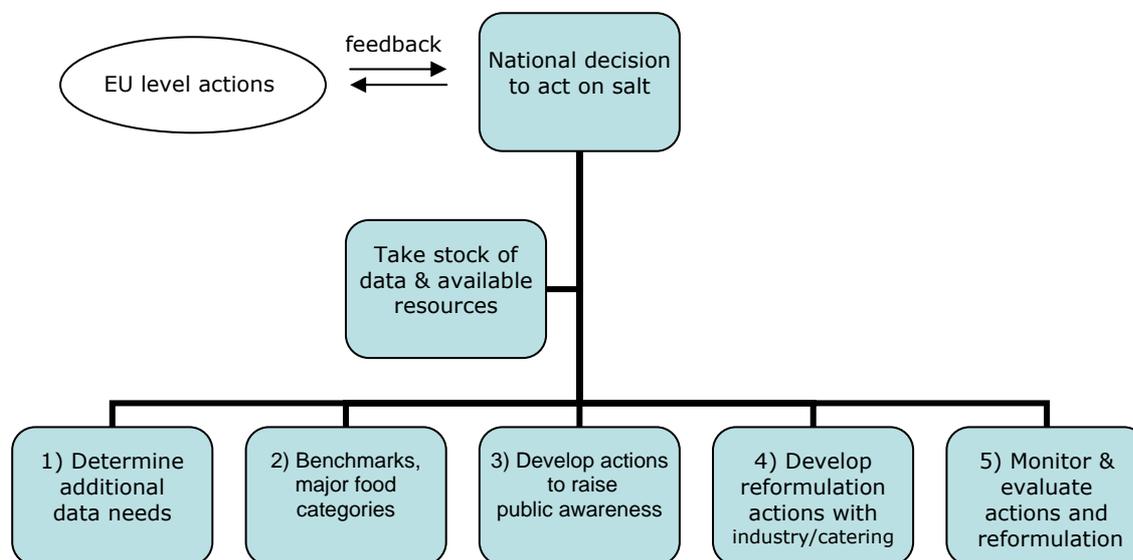
The framework builds on five key elements of salt reduction initiatives, as well as on common, shared minimum benchmarks for salt reduction and shared learning, profiting from experiences of Member States. Engagement with stakeholders at European and national level is encouraged and is seen as essential for success. In order to maximise the impact of salt reformulation food manufacturers are asked prioritise the products with the largest market share. Furthermore, care should be taken that salt reduction is delivered across the full range of food products from premium to economy items so that all population groups can benefit.

Five key elements

Five key elements of a comprehensive approach towards salt reduction are identified. The elements are seen as simultaneous and interconnected strands of action, meaning that a lack of

data should not prevent progress in the other strands of national action. Feedback should be given to the Commission. The HLG members shall commit to work simultaneously on the five following elements of the framework.

Fig.1: Simultaneous and interconnected strands of national action



1) Data: Member States investigate the national data available on salt consumption, current salt levels of foods, and food groups that are the major salt contributors of the national diet. They decide which data needs to be collected in order to fill the gaps.

2) Benchmarks & major food categories to focus action on: It would be difficult to establish targets for salt content levels of foods at European level, as starting points may differ considerably from one Member State to another and time required to reach a certain level may vary considerably. Therefore, at European level, a benchmark for overall salt reduction of a minimum of 16% in 4 years against the individual baseline levels in 2008 has been established, applicable to all food products as well as to food consumed in restaurants and catering facilities such as canteens. This is seen as being realistic and achievable in view of experiences with salt reduction in some Member States, meaning that most industry sectors should be well able and thus expected to reach it. Products should be reduced by 4% per year in order to allow consumers to adapt to the slightly decreasing salty taste and in order to ensure continuous progress. Salt reformulation theory is based on the fact that taste can adapt to gradual reductions if those reductions are achieved across the board.

In order to effectively reduce salt intake it is proposed to concentrate activities at a limited number of food categories, 12 have been identified and Member States select at least 5 categories among them for their national plans. The national plans with benchmarks are published.

Bread
Meat products
Cheeses
Ready meals

Soups
Breakfast cereals
Fish products
Crisps, savoury snacks

Catering meals
Restaurant meals
Sauces, condiments, spices
Potato products

For different food categories, a reduction benchmark other than the 16% could be set. National benchmarks and plans could differ, e.g. if one focus food group is already very low in salt then another category may be selected. It is suggested that priority is given to food categories that commonly represent major sources of salt in average diets. Most Member States prefer to work on the food categories; bread, meat products, cheeses and ready meals. Therefore, those categories will be worked on EU level with highest priority. For meat products and cheeses it is acknowledged that sub-categories may have different benchmarks than 16% in 4 years, including reducing variations between similar products. Member States may set individual benchmarks particularly for sub-categories of meat products and cheeses.

At least in the four food categories bread, meat products, cheeses and ready meals the lowest possible salt levels ('best in class' levels) are identified at EU level. Also, Member States may identify 'best in class' products within further food categories. And food producers are encouraged to move towards those 'best in class' levels for all categories of food. If salt reduction reaches the current 'best in class' this is considered as sufficient progress. However, exceeding the 16 % target or improving the 'best in class' levels is strongly encouraged.

3) Reformulation: Member States will strive to achieve a broad endorsement of the common vision on salt reduction with food producers and their local federations. The Commission will facilitate discussions with multinational companies, avoiding similar discussions to take place in parallel in a number of Member States at national level.

4) Raising public awareness: Raising public awareness are best dealt with at national level and are therefore within the responsibility of each Member State. Benefits include that public awareness creates 'buy-in' from consumers in salt reformulation activities and thus supports reformulation action. Progress may be achieved in partnership with NGOs, industry, media, the health sector and national platforms.

5) Monitoring & evaluation: Activities on reformulation and on raising public awareness as well as actual salt intake of the population need to be monitored. Monitoring is being best dealt with at national level and is therefore the responsibility of each Member State. Various approaches are possible and may be chosen to fit the individual national situation. Options of monitoring approaches include self reporting frameworks by the industry, monitoring of the salt content of foods and intake data, measuring the awareness level of consumers and actual behavioural change as well as salt intake via urinary sodium excretion surveys.

Timeframe

Member States to achieve broad endorsement of this vision by economic operators or representing federations by the end of 2008. Furthermore, Member States will have a monitoring approach in place by the end of 2008. The Salt Action Network (SAN) will publish a standard framework with a minimum data set for information collection and monitoring actions, which could be adopted if this is seen as being helpful, as it could give comparative data across a number of Member States. Initiatives to raise public awareness to be implemented by 2009. A first progress and monitoring report to be submitted to the Commission by the end of 2009. The Commission will share results with participating Member States.