Supporting a population wide reduction of salt consumption in Costa Rica

The Non-Communicable Disease Prevention (NCDP) program supports the generation of new knowledge to help inform policies and programs that are low cost but can have a high impact on reducing the non-communicable disease (NCD) burden and improving overall population health in low- and middle-income countries. NCDP funds research focusing on the main risk factors for NCDs: tobacco use, unhealthy diet, alcohol misuse, and physical inactivity.

The challenge

High salt diets are a major cause of raised blood pressure, which increases the risk for cardiovascular and kidney disease and death. Country-wide initiatives aimed at lowering citizens’ salt intake can improve blood pressure in the general population. However, there are several challenges to salt reduction in many low- and middle-income countries like Costa Rica. These include the lack of information related to the levels of salt in processed and packaged foods, the lack of consumer awareness about salt and its health effects, and the lack of standardized and regulated nutrition labeling.

Identifying the foods that are the main sources of salt for various population groups is an important first step. This information can help countries to develop policies and interventions that will help lower salt intake, monitor nutritional improvement in foods, and prepare educational campaigns.

The research

The main goal of this project is to produce evidence and tools to support the implementation of policies, plans, and interventions for population-wide salt intake reduction in Costa Rica.

The specific objectives of the project are to:

- describe the Costa Rican situation, the overall nutritional quality of the processed and fast food supply, and trends in dietary salt intake and salt content labeling;
- measure the salt content in key processed food products and fast foods;
- identify school children’s knowledge, perceptions, and behaviours on salt and its relation to food labeling and their health, to complement pre-existing surveys of adult consumers;
- develop a strategy to share knowledge between the key sectors concerned and involved with salt consumption reduction efforts in Costa Rica;
- evaluate the effectiveness of the data gathered, the steps taken so far, and the gaps or barriers to implementing salt intake reduction efforts.

Expected results

The project aims to:

- provide the scientific evidence and a baseline from which to continue implementing and evaluating Costa Rica’s national salt intake reduction plan;
- bring together the different sectors (government, scientists, food producers, food marketers, NGOs, and consumers) who have a stake in this issue, to work collaboratively toward solutions for salt reduction;
- gain experience that will benefit other countries in the region looking to implement programs to reduce dietary salt intake.

Project duration: February 2012 to February 2016
Funding: CA$284,190
Lead Researchers: Adriana Blanco-Metzler (ablanco@inciensasa.cr), Institute for Research and Education on Nutrition and Health (INCIENSASA), Costa Rica; Mary L’Abbe (Mary.Labbe@utoronto.ca), University of Toronto, Canada
Recipient Institution: Fundación de la Universidad de Costa Rica para la Investigación, Costa Rica (FUNDEVI)

For more information on this project, contact Robert Geneau, Senior Program Specialist, Ottawa, Canada (rgeneau@idrc.ca)
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