

DAILY EXPRESS

HEALTH SCARE: SALT KILLS 40,000 A YEAR

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HIGH levels of salt added to everyday foods are killing tens of thousands of people in Britain.

Experts estimate that if people **cut** their intake of **salt** to just one teaspoonful a day, it would save at least **40,000** lives a year.

A report published today says many consumers are unable to calculate their intake **due to labels** that sometimes say "sodium" instead of "salt".

This means few people realise that bread contributes the highest amount of salt to their diets, followed by processed meats and then breakfast cereals.

Heart experts have called for a fresh law to clear up what they describe as "a scandal".

About 200,000 people die from cardiovascular disease in the UK each year, but the report says reducing salt intake could cut that by about a fifth, or 40,000. Graham MacGregor, professor of cardiovascular medicine at St George's Hospital in London, has led a campaign to get salt levels down.

He said: "At the moment there is confusion over salt labelling, with some products using the term 'sodium' instead.

"What is sodium? The public have no idea. It's impossible to work out.

"It's a scandal and the food industry has responded very slowly. If there was a uniform system introduced by law it would be terrific as we could tell the public how to understand it."

The latest study, published in the British Medical Journal online, says cutting salt intake from 10 grammes a day – about two teaspoons – to five would reduce global death rates from cardiovascular disease by three million a year.

The analysis is one of the most comprehensive reviews of the link between salt and heart disease and adds to a large body of evidence on the dangers of salt.

The World Health Organisation already recommends that all countries try to reduce salt intake to no more than five grammes.

Although the UK has set its a target of six grammes a day, it has still won respect for doing more than most other nations to reduce salt intake.

In recent years, food producers have been told to slash the amount they add to foods, which has led to a 10 per cent reduction in intake since 2000, saving 6,000 lives a year.

But salt intake still stands at 8.6 grammes, a figure that most health experts agree is too high and there are fears that poor labelling is preventing it falling more quickly.

Although all companies are required by law to put the sodium content on labels, the figure needs to be multiplied by 2.5 to reveal the salt content to shoppers.

Some labels give the salt or sodium content per portion, while others give it per 100 grammes making it even more confusing.

And, while supermarkets have been quick to act on their own brand foods, well known brands have dragged their feet in a bid to remain popular.

A spokeswoman for the British Heart Foundation said: "This study reinforces the link between high intakes of salt and high blood pressure, which is an important risk factor for heart disease and strokes.

"Although it's a good idea to avoid adding salt during cooking or at the table, much of the salt we eat is already in the foods we buy, even everyday ones like bread and cereals.

"As it's not always obvious where the salt is in your diet, it's really important to check and compare food labels, so you can choose the options with the least salt in them".

Last night the Food Standards Agency, the Government's food watchdog, said they believed the UK was well on the way to reducing salt intake to safer levels and the food industry insisted it was playing its part.

A spokesperson for the Food and Drink Federation said: "Our members continue to lead the way on reformulating products to be lower in salt, providing consumers with an even greater choice of 'better-for-you options'. Our members have put in a great deal of time, research and money into changing the recipes of some of Britain's best-loved brands and into creating product ranges which will appeal to customers and support their need for healthy eating choices.

"Research has shown that daily allowance information has been voluntarily included on 63 per cent of food products in the UK and a recent poll found 80 per cent of people knew the guideline daily amount for salt, showing an increased consumer awareness of the importance of eating a diet that is lower in salt."