

Cardiologists, public health experts urge managing salt intake to control hypertension

It is estimated that better hypertension control can prevent 400-500,000 premature deaths

For immediate release

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As India observed Salt Awareness Week from 11th to 17th March, leading doctors and public health experts raised alarm regarding excess salt intake and its impact on the rising prevalence of hypertension in the country. According to the WHO (2019) 1.3 billion people worldwide have hypertension and fewer than 1 in 5 have it under control. The National Health Mission, India states that “hypertension is the number one health related risk factor in India, with the largest contribution to the burden of disease and mortality”. The Global Burden of Diseases, 2019 report finds ischaemic heart disease and stroke the two leading causes of Disabilities Adjusted Life Years (DALY) in the 50+ age group. Hypertension is the main cause of these two conditions and excessive salt intake, a major contributor for hypertension.

Experts therefore call for nationwide prioritization of salt reduction – an easily modifiable risk factor for hypertension that will save millions of Indian lives.

Dr. R. Vadivelu, cardiologist, Velammal Medical College Hospital, Madurai says, ‘Salt and sugar are the two white poisons for those with heart disease or at risk of heart disease. Indians adore salt in their dishes. It is a well known fact that high salt intake causes high blood pressure which then causes increased risk of stroke, heart attack, kidney failure and eye problems. In patients with high blood pressure, a lower salt intake will help control the condition with fewer medications. Similarly, in patients with heart failure, reduced salt intake will reduce the chances of repeated hospitalisation’.

Salt reduction is one of the 9 NCD targets proposed by WHO to be achieved by 2025. India too has pledged to attain this voluntary target of 30% reduction in salt/sodium intake by 2025. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) regularly conducts awareness campaigns such as “Aaj Se Thoda Kam” and the recently concluded “National Low Salt Cooking Challenge” last week as part of the Eat Right India Movement.

Dr Chandrakant Pandav, President, Indian Coalition for the Control of Iodine Deficiency Disorders (ICCIDD), warns that the importance of salt in relation to cardio vascular disease and hypertension is a largely ignored issue. Dr Pandav, popularly known as the ‘iodine man’ of the

country, said, “By fortifying its salt with iodine, India had taken a gigantic step and saved millions of lives. It is time now to aggressively reduce salt intake to prevent cardiovascular disease burden. This is a tall task as an average Indian consumes about 10 gms of salt per day, which is double the recommended amount of 5 gms. For a dietary shift of this scale, consumer education will have to be supplemented with regulatory measures such as warning labels, introduction of mandatory thresholds, salt substitutes being made available. This will require a multi stakeholder approach led by the government with full cooperation of industry, medical community and the media.”

“Recognising the seriousness of the issue, it is important that consumers reduce intake of salt, and the FSSAI introduces the Front of Pack Labelling Regulations that mandate clear warnings to consumers on the presence of salt, sugar and fat so that they are able to make informed choices, said Savitha, Researcher at the Citizen consumer and civic Action Group.”

Hypertension, often termed as a silent killer because it can exist without symptoms, has gained prominence recently as a leading Covid-19 comorbidity. More than 1 billion people across the world are living with this condition and there are countless others who remain undiagnosed and untreated. Treatment compliance is extremely poor, leaving a large section of the population vulnerable to sudden cardiac events. Reduction of raised blood pressure and reduced intake of salt were included as targets in the global NCD action plan in 2011. It is estimated that in India alone, better hypertension control can prevent 400-500,000 premature deaths.

About Citizen consumer and civic Action Group (CAG):

CAG is a 35-year-old non-profit and non-political organisation that works towards protecting citizens' rights in consumer, civic and environmental issues and promoting good governance processes including transparency, accountability and participatory decision-making.

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