

Regulating salt content 'will increase price of bread'

By [Tamar Kahn](#)

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One of SA's biggest bread makers, Pioneer Foods, has warned that the government's proposals for regulating the salt content of food, if accepted in their present form, will drive up the cost of its loaves.

Its concerns about the effect on bread production have been echoed by Woolworths, which said the government's suggestions for limiting the salt content of deli meat posed a potential health hazard.

The Department of Health sees salt as a significant contributor to the nation's growing burden of noncommunicable diseases, and is including bread in its targets because it is a staple food for many people.

Up to 40% of South Africans' daily intake of salt comes from bread, according to Wits research.

Table salt is sodium chloride, and it is the sodium that causes all the trouble: it elevates blood pressure, which is linked to increased risks of heart attacks and strokes.

Wits researcher Karen Hofman said the implications of more expensive bread needed to be considered against the economic costs of diseases linked to excessive salt consumption, and the government needed to protect South Africans by regulating food producers.

Prof Hofman and her colleagues conducted a study, accepted for publication in the South African Medical Journal, which showed that cutting the sodium content of bread from 650mg/100g to 350mg/100g would prevent about 2000 fatal and 2300 nonfatal strokes each year.

It would also prevent 3000 deaths from ischemic and hypertensive heart disease.

The prevalence of high blood pressure had risen in the past decade, she said, soaring to 60% among men aged between 45 and 55 (from 39%) and to 50% among women of the same age (from 38%), driven in part by a diet with too much salt. "Many countries report that reducing salt content in processed foods, either voluntarily or through legislation, not only prevents cardiovascular disease, but is more cost-effective than individual dietary changes. It has a much greater population health impact," she said.

The department published draft regulations on 6 July proposing limits to the sodium content of a range of widely consumed foods, with targets set for 2016 and 2018.

Those for an ordinary loaf of bread are 400mg of sodium per 100g (about two slices) by 2016, and 370mg sodium per 100g by 2018.

Pioneer's bread division, Sasko, had been reducing the sodium content of its products, which now contained between 470mg/100g and 520mg/100g, said milling and baking executive Tertius Carstens. "Levels lower than this are expected to add substantial technical and practical challenges to bread baking."

Pioneer considered the 2016 target "achievable" but believed this was as low as they should go. "A commercially acceptable solution is not available to deliver on the proposed 370mg/100g target," he said.

Carstens said salt played a vital role in the bread-making process: it toughened the dough and improved its handling properties during processing, and helped give bread a fine texture. It also controlled the activity of yeast, preventing premature fermentation.

Alternatives to sodium chloride, such as potassium chloride, were much more expensive and left an unpleasant metallic taste even at relatively low concentrations, he said.

Woolworths MD of food Zyda Rylands said the company supported salt reduction, but the proposed regulations could hamper the bread manufacturing process. The reductions in sodium levels for processed meat could potentially make these products unsafe, as it helped control microbial growth.

Source: *Business Day*

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