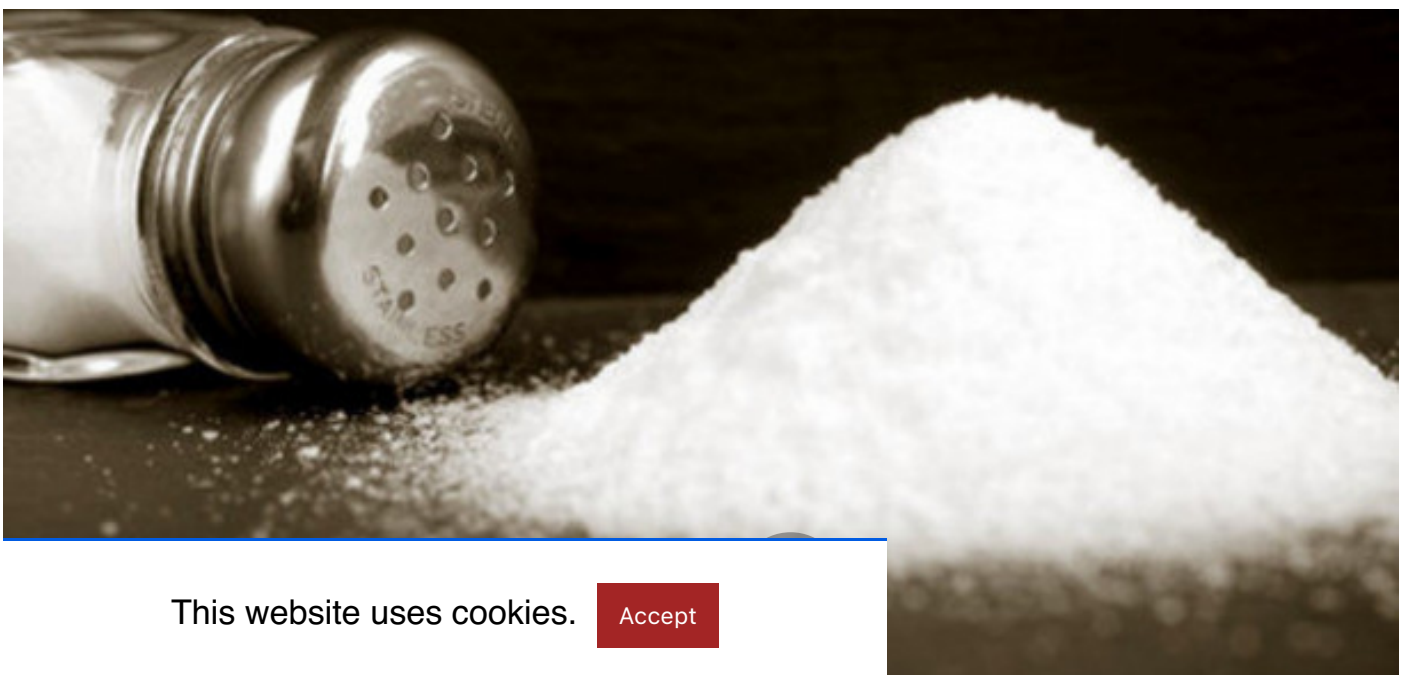




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Your Say

Excessive salt consumption: The time to act is now



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BY GUEST WRITER

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BY OLUKEMI BUKOLA ODELE

Nigeria records an estimated daily salt consumption reaching up to 5.8grams per day, dangerously exceeding the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommended limit of 2 grams of sodium per day or less than 5 grams of salt per day, which is equivalent to just one teaspoon of salt daily.

This alarming statistic is not surprising given the significant changes in the Nigerian diet. The influx of processed foods and seasonings loaded with high sodium on local market shelves and the growth of unhealthy fast food outlets has led to a nutritional transition in the country that poses a grave risk to public health. Furthermore, changes in daily population routines and work dynamics have also contributed to the development of unhealthy dietary

dynamics have also contributed to the development of unhealthy eating behaviours in Nigerians.

According to public health experts, these changes in the country's dietary patterns, also marked by an increased sodium consumption in homemade meals, elevate the risk of hypertension and other cardiovascular diseases which contribute to 12% of deaths in Nigeria. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), of which excessive sodium intake is a major risk factor, are significantly on the rise in Nigeria. Data from the Global Burden of Disease for 2019 reveals that cardiovascular diseases accounted for 29% of all NCD and injury-related deaths in Nigeria, with cancers responsible for 14.5%, diabetes mellitus at 4.4%, and chronic respiratory diseases also at 4.4%. These casualties have significant economic and social repercussions for those affected, their families, and the government. For instance, the yearly expense of treating hypertension is estimated at N145,000 per person in Nigeria, a financial burden that places additional strain on the country's ill-equipped healthcare systems.

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Sadly, a recent opinion poll conducted by Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa (CAPPA) – a non-profit and public health-focused

Food for Anticipation Limited (FFAL), a non-profit and public health focused organisation, revealed that over 70% of respondents were unaware of the recommended daily salt or sodium intake, potentially leading to excessive consumption. Preliminary studies from the same organisation have also identified several staple foods in Nigeria, such as bread, suya, snacks, dairy noodles, and shrimp among others as high-sodium items.

In a concerted effort to tackle high sodium intake in the population and its harmful effects on public health, Nigeria integrated a sodium reduction programme into its 2019-2025 National Multi-sectoral Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases, in alignment with the WHO SHAKE package. This SHAKE package, which is an acronym for Surveillance, Harnessing Industry, Adopting Standards for Labeling and Marketing, Knowledge, and Environment, offers a comprehensive framework and guidelines for implementing a successful national salt reduction strategy.

Accordingly, Nigeria's sodium reduction plan prioritises a variety of actions and strategies to lower national sodium consumption. They include reformulating policies to reduce salt content in the national food chain, enforcing mandatory sodium limits in processed foods and regulations on food and beverage advertising to children and adolescents, and imposing elaborate front-of-package labelling to provide consumers with quick and easily accessible product nutritional information. Additionally, the plan involves launching health education programs in schools and extensive mass-media campaigns to raise public awareness about the hazards of excessive salt consumption.

Nonetheless, despite the commendable launch of this action plan, progress in implementing outlined strategies has been far from smooth, hampered by delays in establishing a national salt target for processed and packaged foods, deficiencies in policy reformulations and weak enforcement mechanisms to ensure manufacturers' compliance with healthy food policies in the country. The cost of these impediments is the mounting toll of lives lost, and a surge in non-communicable diseases within the country.

Now more than ever, it is imperative for the Federal Ministry of Health, National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control and other key actors to ramp up activities on different regulations, policy documents, actions and interventions that can reverse the rising burden of hypertension and cardiovascular disease-related deaths in Nigeria.

Industries, small and medium-sized enterprises, and local vendors must be closely monitored to ensure compliance with clearly defined national food safety standards. Additionally, the Nigerian government must empower its National Orientation Agency to embark on widespread public awareness campaigns aimed at changing consumption patterns. These efforts must focus on educating the public about the health consequences of high salt intake, enabling individuals to adopt healthier lifestyles and dietary choices.

Odele, a food scientist is the programme officer, Sodium Reduction at the

Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa (CAPPA).

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