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Feb 09 2013

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AUB study: Staple Lebanese breakfast foods high in sodium

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09 February 2013

BEIRUT: Manakeesh, labneh and other high-sodium staples of the Lebanese diet may be responsible for high rates of cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure in the country, according to a recent study by the American University of Beirut Medical Center and the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences.

Researchers surveyed the eating habits of 2,000 adults across the country and found that the majority of Lebanese people consume well over the 5 gram daily sodium intake limit prescribed by the World Health Organization. Processed breads, cheeses and cured meats account for 70 percent of the average sodium intake in the country, said Lara Nasreddine, an assistant professor of nutrition at AUB who co-authored the paper.

"It is a real public health concern because we are witnessing a high level of hypertension and cardiovascular diseases in Lebanon, and we need to raise awareness about the major sources of salt in our diet," she told The Daily Star. "People know they are eating salt when they shake it on their food, but they need to be able to understand what food labels mean in order to make better choices about their salt intake."

In the study, manakeesh was singled out as a wolf in sheep's clothing. It accounts for 4 percent of the average individual sodium intake in Lebanon and dough-based foods in general account for 25 percent of the total.

According to WHO's most recent estimates in 2008, 39 percent of the population suffers from high blood pressure and 30 percent of these cases are the result of high salt intake. Excessive sodium consumption can also cause cardiovascular diseases, strokes, stomach cancer and osteoporosis.

Nasreddine said that the researchers tried to determine the public health costs of treating diseases associated with excessive salt intake but were not able to calculate exact figures due to a lack of publicly available data.

The release of the study is just one prong in AUB's strategy to raise awareness of the risks associated with too much salt consumption. In November 2011, two AUB Medical School faculty members created the Lebanon Action for Salt and Health group to do research and advocacy work on sodium-related health issues and identify the primary sources of salt in local cuisine.

LASH has put together a shopping list of foods suitable for low-salt diets and those that should be avoided.

The group is also working on the AUB Neighborhood Salt Map project to identify high-sodium products sold at bakeries in the Ras Beirut area.

Another goal is to improve food labeling systems in coordination with public health officials to better inform people of the nutrition information listed in prepackaged food labels.

Though too much manakeesh can wreak havoc on ones' waistline in a matter of weeks, Nasreddine warned that the symptoms of a high-sodium diet are not always immediately visible.

"You might get headaches or have high blood pressure, but hypertension can also be asymptomatic, which is why it can be so dangerous, because the [patient] might not have any symptoms until late into the disease."

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