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New AUB study: staple Lebanese breakfast foods high in salt content

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PRESS RELEASE

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High salt intake has long been established to increase the risk for cardiovascular diseases, but a new study from the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences and the American University of Beirut Medical Center has identified two staples in the Lebanese diet as major sources of salt.

The study, whose results were presented in the Lebanese Epidemiology Association meeting held last November 2012 by assistant professor of nutrition Lara Nasreddine, shows that 25% of the Lebanese population's sodium intake comes from bread and dough-based foods, including 4% from Lebanese thyme 'pizzas' or mana'eesh.

"Reducing salt intake decreases the risk of heart attacks, myocardial infarctions, strokes and hypertension," said Dr. Hussain Isma'eel, assistant professor of medicine and co-director of the Vascular Medicine

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Programme.

"Lowering salt consumption is among the most cost-effective methods to prevent death as a result of cardiovascular diseases," he added.

In order to raise awareness about the harmful effects of excessive salt consumption and its contribution to hypertension and other diseases -whose prevalence is high among the Lebanese population-- AUBMC's relatively new Vascular Medicine Programme, through a plan developed by Dr. Haya Hamadeh from pediatrics and Isma'eel, pioneered the Lebanon Action for Salt and Health (LASH) group in November 2011.

According to 2008 World Health Organization (WHO) estimates, hypertension (high blood pressure) has 39% prevalence in the Lebanese population; and it is estimated that high dietary salt intake is behind up to 30% of hypertension prevalence. Consumption of excessive amounts of sodium not only accounts for hypertension but also contributes to cardiovascular diseases, stroke, stomach cancer, osteoporosis, left ventricular hypertrophy, and renal disease.

Extensive evidence has shown the benefits of reducing salt intake. Currently, the WHO recommends a daily salt consumption of less than 5 grams per day.

Isma'eel explained that the aim of LASH is to increase the amount of salt-related data in Lebanon, improve awareness about the dangers of excessive salt consumption, change attitudes and behavior, create a 'low-salt environment' through product reformulation and regulation and establish a national salt monitoring and evaluation system.

"The goal is to develop a national strategy to optimize the Lebanese population's salt intake," added Isma'eel.

To achieve these objectives, LASH has adopted a strategy centered around four pillars: research, health communications, advocacy, and evaluation and monitoring. Since its inception in November 2011, LASH has been busy identifying the primary sources of salt in the Lebanese cuisine: bread and mana'eesh (and other

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bread-like products and breakfast foods), processed meat and cheese and labneh. LASH has also put together a low-salt shopping guide, to be distributed at AUBMC and in workshops, listing the recommended foods suitable for a low-salt diet and those that should be avoided.

LASH will also be tackling factors such as regulation and product reformulation.

"Next, we're going national," said Isma'eel, highlighting two actions previewed for LASH: In addition to Ismail and Nasreddine, cardiologist Samir Arnaout, and internist Adel Berberi will be going to different Lebanese regions, inviting physicians from different hospitals and training them on salt-reduction techniques and benefits. They will also be conducting salt-reduction workshops to health care staff in different hospitals outside Beirut.

More importantly, "We're moving towards changing national health policy," noted Isma'eel. LASH aims to partner with national regulatory bodies as well as food industry representatives to develop low-salt product reformulation standards and to lobby for effective and user-friendly food labels.

Similar to previous international experiences, increasing salt health risk awareness in the Lebanese population coupled with reformulating food products to contain less salt is likely to result in the most significant drop in salt intake. Consequently, LASH, through associate professor Ammar Olabi and professor Imad Tufaily, both from food sciences, is establishing an AUB Neighborhood Salt Map (AUBNSM), which details sodium levels found in the products of bakeries in the Ras Beirut area.



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