



Reformulation targets making a difference

This year marks an important milestone for the Heart Foundation and its work with food companies to reduce sodium levels. Ten years ago, the Heart Foundation started working with food industry to set sodium reduction targets for loaf bread. The 2007 pilot was a success with major companies achieving 18% sodium reductions in one year in many packaged loaf breads. Since 2010 the programme has been extended to 14 core food categories and more recently, has also focused on setting sugar reduction targets.

Reducing the sodium and sugar in our food supply is critical to improving the health of New Zealanders. High intakes of these nutrients are significantly impacting on New Zealanders' risk of non-communicable diseases such as heart disease and obesity. Some processed food categories contain large amounts of sugar and salt – it is estimated that processed foods contribute 75% of our salt intake. While some positive work to reduce sodium and sugar has been undertaken by food companies, a lot more is needed.

The Healthy Kids' Pledge Framework, an initiative within the government's Childhood Obesity Plan, launched in 2016, emphasises the role food companies can play in improving the food supply. Reformulation presents an effective way for food companies to achieve their pledges.

Opportunities

The Heart Foundation programme, which is funded by the Ministry of Health, involves establishing voluntary reformulation targets in partnership with the food industry. The objective of the reformulation programme is to have at least 80% of the market share (by sales volume) meeting the targets, with high volume, low cost foods being prioritised. Agreement from the key manufacturers on targets helps create a level playing field that they can all work towards, thereby minimising risk for the companies. The work is carried out in the absence of any consumer awareness campaign.

Companies indicate that these targets can be aligned with their own internal reformulation programmes (such as working towards Health Star Ratings) and can also impact on new product development.

Challenges

In addition to flavour, salt and sugar have many functional roles within processed foods. The likelihood of consumer detection of lower salt and sugar is often considered a barrier to reformulation, however small reductions are often not detectable. The programme now builds in longer timeframes (up to 5 years) to allow companies to make stepwise reductions. As well as salt removal, some companies achieve sodium reduction by partial substitution with potassium and magnesium salts.

While companies have been open to the possibility of setting sugar reduction targets, for most of them this is new territory and sugar reduction can be more challenging than sodium reduction. Although we are encouraging sugar reduction, we need to be mindful of what is replacing sugar. While use of non-nutritive sweeteners (NNS) is



one option for manufacturers, there are unknowns around the effect of these sweeteners on the gut microbiome. We recommend trying to reduce sugar in the absence of NNS, which will also achieve a reduction in the sweetness flavour profile across a category.

Another challenge is the cost of reformulation, but this can be partly alleviated if aligned with planning for product and packaging renovations.

Progress

Major companies, representing 75% - 80% market share of the food categories, have been engaged in the process of setting targets in the Heart Foundation programme. As a result of company action towards these reformulation targets and their own nutrition policies, the following key changes have been achieved:

- Sodium levels in bread are now 25% lower than when the pilot was initiated in 2007.
- Some cornflake and puffed rice breakfast cereals are 33% lower in sodium since targets were set in 2010. Since that time there has been an average 15% reduction in sodium in the other ready-to-eat cereals category and an average reduction of 23% in sodium content of reformulated products across the category.
- In the year following the resetting of Processed Meats targets in December 2015, 30 products were reformulated, achieving an average sodium reduction of 12%.

We estimate that since the Heart Foundation bread pilot in 2007, approximately 265 tonnes of salt per annum have been removed from targeted products in New Zealand.

Moving forward

Over the coming year the reformulation programme will be expanding in the number and scope of food categories. Updates of the programme are available on the Heart Foundation website.

While the Heart Foundation engages with major manufacturers, those with a smaller market share are encouraged to contact the Heart Foundation if they are interested in being involved in the reformulation programme.

There is an increasing global focus on reducing population intakes of sodium and sugar and processed food companies have a key part to play in achieving this. Many have demonstrated that prioritising sodium and sugar reduction as part of their product review schedule is feasible. While there have been some outstanding achievements in some of the high volume foods, there is so much more that can be done to build on this success and improve the health of all New Zealanders.