Less Salt Could Cut Healthcare Costs By Billions

(Reuters) Working with the food industry to cut salt intake by nearly 10 percent could prevent hundreds of thousands of heart attacks and strokes over several decades and save the U.S. government $32 billion in healthcare costs, U.S. researchers said. Eating too much salt is a major cause of high blood pressure, which the Institute of Medicine last week declared a neglected disease that costs the U.S. health system $73 billion a year.

Several governments, including the United States, are looking for solutions to curb salt intake as a way to head off future heart attacks and strokes that drain healthcare systems. The study by a team at the Stanford University School of Medicine and the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System in California used a computer model to measure the impact of two different scenarios for reducing salt intake on a population level – a voluntary collaboration with the U.S. food industry and a national tax on salt.

They found the voluntary program, based on a similar salt-reduction campaign in Britain, to be the most effective. The team estimated that a government-industry effort could cut Americans' salt intake by 9.5 percent. “In our analysis, we found these small decreases in blood pressure would be effective in reducing deaths due to cardiovascular disease,” said Dr. Crystal Smith-Spangler, whose study appears in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

The salt reduction campaign could prevent 513,885 fatal strokes and 480,358 heart attacks over the lifetimes of U.S. adults who are aged 40 to 85 today. That would save $32.1 billion in health costs during the lifetime of this group, including $14 billion in hospitalizations for strokes and heart attacks.

By contrast, a tax on salt would cut salt intake by an estimated six percent, resulting in 327,892 fewer strokes and 306,173 fewer heart attacks, the team calculated.

As many as 75 percent of Americans consume more than the suggested maximum of 2.3 grams of salt a day, Dr. Thomas Frieden, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said in a commentary in the journal. Because three-fourths of Americans' salt intake comes from processed foods and restaurant meals, he said, it is not feasible to reduce the nation's salt intake without food industry cooperation.

A program in Britain to cut salt intake in foods has resulted in a 20 to 30 percent decline in salt in processed foods sold in stores since 2003. Japan, Finland, Ireland, Australia and Canada have launched similar initiatives, Frieden said. The city of New York started a program in January to encourage food makers and restaurant chains to cut their salt use by 25 percent over the next five years.

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