

 June 22, 2010 LONDON, June 22 Britain's influential health cost watchdog called today for major changes in food production and marketing and said drastic cuts in fat and salt levels were needed to halt the scourge of heart disease.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) said trans fats, which do little more than prolong shelf life, should be banned from all food, saturated fat levels cut drastically and average salt intake more than halved by 2025.

If these changes were implemented, around 40,000 early deaths could be prevented each year in Britain alone and millions of people could be spared the suffering of living with the effects of heart disease and stroke, NICE said.

Mike Kelly, NICE's director for public health, said the financial costs of heart disease added up to around 30 billion pounds (RM142 billion) a year in Britain, taking in treatment costs, lost productivity, care and other social costs.

This is a big ticket item. And it is something that is eminently within our power to do something about, he told a briefing. This isn't some mystery virus which we don't understand ... this is something where we know precisely what the causes are and we know precisely what we can do about it.

NICE does not produce legislation but it is asked by the government to draw up health policy guidelines.

NICE said policymakers should aim to reduce average adult salt intake in Britain to 3 grams a day by 2025 from around 8.5 grams now and introduce laws on cuts if necessary.

Politicians were also urged to negotiate at European Union and national level to ensure agricultural policy took account of public health issues.

Kelly said this meant encouraging farmers to concentrate on producing high quality food such as fruits and vegetables, low fat dairy products, lean meats and whole grains.

It also urged the government to tighten planning laws to stop fast-food outlets setting up too close to schools, and said legislation should be considered to force the food industry to cut saturated fat levels if they would not do so voluntarily.

A model for Europe?

The European Society of Cardiology praised NICE for setting out a range of evidence-based recommendations for effective action to help reduce levels of heart disease and said its guidelines also had important messages for the rest of Europe.

This is an extremely strong document that clearly underlines how much can be gained ... by introducing legislative changes protecting the content of diets, said ESC spokesman Lars Ryden from the Sweden's Karolinska Institute.

NICE, which produced its guidelines on preventing heart disease after two years of work, cited scientific research showing that in countries such as Japan, the United States, Denmark and Finland where some laws are in place banning certain fats and forcing lower salt levels dramatic health benefits swiftly follow.

The benefits of doing this will be seen remarkably quickly, within 2-3 years, said Simon Capewell, a member of NICE's panel and a professor of epidemiology at Liverpool University.

He said that if salt levels in food were gradually reduced by between 5 and 10 per cent a year, most consumers would not notice any difference in taste. This suggests the food industry, which has sometimes argued that consumers complain if it cuts food salt levels too far, has little to back such claims.

Cutting salt intake substantially reduces blood pressure, helping to lower the risk of heart attacks and strokes. High blood pressure is ranked as the world's number one killer, accounting for 7.5 million deaths a year.

Reuters

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Call for ban on trans fats, cut in salt

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