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Harper must demand action on sodium levels, health groups urge

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Say failure to do so sends the message that the interests of the food industry are more important than the health of Canadians

Some of the country's most prominent health organizations have banded together to demand action from Prime Minister Stephen Harper on a national plan to reduce excessive sodium consumption in Canada.

The groups, which include the Canadian Medical Association, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, Hypertension Canada and the Canadian Stroke Network, say failure to take action on this urgent issue sends the message that the interests of the food industry are more important than the health of Canadians.

"This, to me, is very, very troubling," said Norm Campbell, Canadian Institutes of Health Research chair in hypertension prevention and control, and professor of medicine at the University of Calgary.

The concerns are outlined in a letter signed by nearly two dozen health groups that was sent to the Prime Minister's Office last week, as well as to provincial and territorial premiers. A copy of the letter was provided to The Globe and Mail.

The average Canadian consumes 3,400 milligrams of sodium a day, more than double the recommended amount of 1,500 milligrams, which puts tens of thousands at risk for high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and a host of other health problems. About 80 per cent of the sodium Canadians consume is added to products by manufacturers.

The federal government created a task force that issued a comprehensive report in 2010 detailing possible solutions to the problem, most notably the establishment of maximum allowable targets for sodium in food products sold in Canada.

But the task force was disbanded without warning last year and many of the group's recommendations seem to have been abandoned in the process.

For instance, while the federal government says it supports the broad goal of reducing the average daily sodium intake to 2,300 milligrams by 2016, it backed away from a plan to create reduction targets that would have required companies to lower the amount of sodium in their products.

An official from Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq's office has said the approach of adopting reduction targets is too heavy-handed and there are other ways to accomplish the goals.

But experts say that the government seems to have cowed to the interests of food companies and that without the key reduction initiative, there is no way average sodium intake in Canada will decline substantially.

"For this approach to be successful, we need to have targets, firm targets established for different categories of food," said Kevin Willis, director of partnerships at the Canadian Stroke Network. "It certainly gives the impression the federal government is perhaps putting interests of the food industry before the health of the population."

The federal government also failed to endorse a joint sodium reduction report presented at a meeting of provincial, territorial and federal health ministers this past November. The provinces have expressed keen interest in the area of sodium and have been working to establish a reduction plan.

The decision by the federal government not to endorse the report "will be seen as a signal to the food processing industry and food service establishments that our national government is not serious about the need to commit ..." to sodium reduction goals, the health groups' letter says.

The argument sodium reduction targets are too onerous and won't receive industry buy-in "sends the clear message to Canadians that private interest takes precedence over food safety and their health and wellness," the letter continues.

Derek Nighbor, senior vice-president of public and regulatory affairs at Food and Consumer Products of Canada, an industry group, said that's simply not true. The food industry is committed to reducing salt, as seen in many lower-sodium offerings in grocery stores, and is continuously working to achieve goals, Mr. Nighbor said. But it's a complex, scientific process that will take time.

"Sodium reduction is the right thing to do," he said.

The Prime Minister's Office did not respond to a request for comment. Steve Outhouse, a spokesman for Ms. Aglukkaq, said creating and policing reduction targets for every food category would be a "bureaucratic nightmare," but the government is committed to working with industry to deliver low-sodium options to the public.

There has been some controversy recently about the need to cut back on salt following publication of studies that suggested lower sodium was linked to health problems, while higher amounts offered a protective benefit. But experts say those studies had serious flaws, such as only following participants for short periods, making it impossible to draw conclusions about the long-term effects of a high-sodium diet.

The World Health Organization and the United Nations have declared sodium reduction to be a major public health priority necessary to prevent chronic disease.

An estimated 7.5 million Canadian adults have been diagnosed with high blood pressure, a condition that causes half of all cases of cardiovascular disease and more than six in 10 strokes. High salt intake is also linked to kidney problems, osteoporosis, stomach cancer and other serious issues.

"These are really massive numbers," Dr. Campbell said. "These are our friends, our relatives, our family and maybe us."

Read the Globe's award-winning special report *Salt: Hard to Shake* [<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/special-reports/hard-to-shake>]

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