New guidelines on dietary salt, potassium

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has released new guidelines on dietary salt and potassium to reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

According to the new guidelines issued on Thursday in Geneva, adults should consume less than 2.000 mg (2 grams) of sodium, or 5 grams of salt and at least 3.510 mg (3.51 grams) of potassium per day.

Director of the World Health Organisation's Department of Nutrition for Health and Development, Dr Francesco Branca, warned that a person with either elevated sodium levels or low potassium levels could be at risk of raised blood pressure, which increases the risk of heart disease and stroke.

"Currently, most people consume too much sodium and not enough potassium. Elevated blood pressure is a major risk for heart disease and stroke - the number one cause of death and disability globally," said Dr Branca.

High dietary salt intake is estimated to cause about a third of all hypertension cases. It is also responsible for illnesses, including stroke and kidney disease.

According to research, 6 500 lives can be saved if salt intake is reduced. The South African diet is generally high in salt content, with the population's salt intake averaging 8 grams a day.

Sodium is found naturally in a variety of foods, including milk, cream and eggs. It is also found in much higher amounts in processed foods such as bread, processed meats like bacon, snack foods, cheese puffs and popcorn, as well as in condiments such as soy sauce and bouillon or stock cubes.

Potassium-rich foods include beans and peas, nuts, vegetables such as spinach, cabbage and parsley, bananas, papayas and dates. Processing reduces the amount of potassium in many food products.

Branca added that the guidelines also make recommendations for children over the age of two, noting that this was critical because children with elevated blood pressure often become adults with elevated blood pressure.

WHO is also updating guidelines on the intake of fats and sugars associated to reduced risk of obesity and NCDs.