

Evaluating the Sodium Reduction in Communities Program

Lessons Learned from Planning and Early Implementation



Overview

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognizes the importance of a population-based approach to reduce sodium consumption. In 2010, CDC's Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention launched the Sodium Reduction in Communities Program (SRCP) to reduce sodium intake by helping create healthier food environments at the local level. Six SRCP communities are putting into action varied strategies to increase the availability and accessibility of healthier foods in schools, restaurants, hospitals, congregate sites (e.g., senior meal centers, correctional facilities), grocery stores, convenience stores, and government and private worksites. Learn more about SRCP strategies at www.cdc.gov/salt.

Community-based efforts to reduce sodium are relatively new to public health and have few evidence-based implementation models. To aid public health practitioners considering sodium reduction work, this document provides overarching lessons learned from the planning and early implementation stages of the SRCP initiatives.

Lesson 1: Know the Environment

Gathering contextual information about the settings where sodium reduction efforts will be used is an integral planning activity. Local SRCP staff assess food environments, food purchasing processes and practices, and food service operations to learn about target venues and their ability to make changes in sodium content. Interviewing stakeholders, reviewing purchase orders, and conducting pantry inventories can uncover important details about the food environment. Environmental scans help determine which existing infrastructure, operations, practices, and food offerings are present (e.g., How is the kitchen equipped? Do vending machines have lower sodium snacks?). Understanding the environment and learning about partner organizations can help establish a baseline, uncover potential challenges, and develop tailored interventions for specific venues.

Lesson 2: Identify and Build Relationships with Key Partners and Champions

Champions who can help promote sodium reduction are particularly helpful when working with nontraditional public health partners. During the planning process, local SRCP staff identify key stakeholders to participate in or support sodium reduction efforts. Champions such as health officers, school board members, and local business owners raise community awareness. These allies—often early adopters who have already embraced sodium reduction efforts—assist by carrying out planned interventions, providing feedback on successes and challenges, and encouraging others in their network to

Example: Addressing Partner Priorities

Local SRCP staff learned that corner store owners were unwilling to convene as a group to discuss strategies for promoting lower sodium foods. They were particularly concerned about sharing sales information with their competitors. SRCP staff altered their approach by meeting with owners one-on-one.



reduce sodium. To promote a mutually beneficial relationship for the lead organization and partners, SRCP staff familiarize themselves with partners' priorities, concerns, and needs.

Lesson 3: Involve Venue-Specific Experts Early

Individuals with venue-specific or content expertise can provide insight and guidance on how to design and put into action sodium reduction strategies, avoid pitfalls, and address common concerns. An individual knowledgeable about the settings for sodium reduction can translate venue-specific jargon and practices into plain language. Likewise, a person with technical expertise, especially culinary and nutrition knowledge, can make suggestions for reducing sodium in recipes and on menus. Engaging relevant purchasing agents (e.g., vendors, food service directors, kitchen managers) helps public health practitioners better understand procurement processes and potential challenges.

Example: Involving Experts

Local SRCP staff collaborated with a leading restaurateur and president of a local buying cooperative in planning strategies to work with restaurants. This key stakeholder helped staff understand the restaurant business, select appropriate strategies, and recruit other restaurant owners to participate in sodium reduction efforts.



Lesson 4: Link Sodium Reduction to Other Nutrition Strategies

Community-based sodium reduction may be unfamiliar to many public health practitioners. Rather than singling out sodium as a stand-alone topic, integrating sodium messaging into existing wellness or nutrition efforts promotes sodium reduction and healthy eating simultaneously. Drawing on previous relationships and lessons learned using nutrition strategies provides practitioners with a starting point. Partners who have collaborated on other nutrition efforts already have an interest in improving the food environment and may be more ready to use sodium reduction strategies. Additionally, community health partners for other nutrition topics can serve as advocates for the importance of reducing sodium.



Lesson 5: Reduce Sodium Gradually

Restaurant owners, school food service personnel, and other partners may be concerned about how dramatic reductions in sodium will affect their customers, students, or employees. To maintain customer satisfaction, local SRCP staff encourage partners to gradually reduce sodium, such as replacing high sodium ingredients with lower sodium substitutions, serving more fresh fruits and vegetables, and changing cooking techniques to rely less on prepared, packaged foods.

Next Steps

Community-based sodium reduction is an emerging public health strategy. For public health practitioners interested in pursuing this work, these five early lessons from the SRCP communities highlight

the importance of initial planning and implementation being tailored to community needs and building on existing capacity of traditional and nontraditional partners. Additional summaries of lessons learned in specific venues, such as restaurants and schools, are forthcoming.