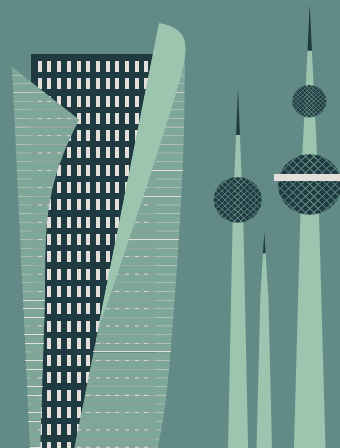


KUWAIT

# Kuwait City



**Intervention area:** Healthy food for all

**City action:** The reformulation of popular snacks to reduce salt content

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In 2013, the State of Kuwait faced a number of health challenges linked to excessive salt consumption, including almost a quarter of Kuwaiti males and females aged 20–49 living with hypertension. At that time, bread was the second-highest source of sodium in the average Kuwaiti diet (around 28% of salt intake came from bread).<sup>i</sup> The Kuwaiti Ministry of Health worked with local industry to reformulate bread manufacturing to reduce its salt content. By establishing a good working relationship with the market leader in bread production, which provides 80% of Kuwait City's bread, an initial 10% salt reduction target was not only met but exceeded. By the end of 2013 the most consumed type of bread – pitta – had its salt content reduced by 20%.<sup>ii</sup>

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The experience of reducing the salt content in bread demonstrated that collaboration with industry could support successful reformulation when targets for companies were voluntary. It had shown that it was difficult to apply a blanket reduction because differences in manufacturing meant that a standard percentage reduction affected the taste or the texture of some breads more than others. This led to industry reluctance to implement change out of fears it would negatively impact sales in comparison to competitors. Concern about the impact of reformulation on industry profits was a dominant theme for other high-salt foods besides bread, including potato crisps, cheese and other savoury snacks.

In 2017 the Community Nutrition Sector (CNS) – part of the Public Authority for Food and Nutrition (PAFN) – used a similar approach to encourage reformulation of other high-salt items,

particularly crisps, estimated to be the third-highest source of salt in the Kuwaiti diet. Their aim was to establish a dialogue between the business and public health sectors, helping each to understand the specific challenges facing the other. This was even more important in this case since, unlike bread, there was no single dominant producer but rather a number of companies. By working collectively, it was hoped that greater progress would be made than through individual negotiations.

In June 2017, PAFN's Community Nutrition Sector (CNS) met six popular producers of potato crisps and popcorn. They used a survey showing that 65% of crisps and snacks sold contained more than 1.5 g of salt per 100 g of food, classified as "high" by the national Food Standards Agency. They also explained reasons for reducing salt intake: the rising trends of high blood pressure and obesity in Kuwait City, the global commitments to reduce salt intake by 2025, and the importance of voluntary action to support citizen health.

Four of the six producers immediately responded positively. However, because they imported ready-made mixes of certain flavours, changing the composition for use in Kuwait City was difficult. Economies of scale meant that packaging was also produced for locations beyond the city itself, which would mean additional changes. However, with some time to negotiate and introduce changes in flavours and packaging, the changes were deemed possible.

CNS granted the producers 6 months to prepare for these changes. Nine months later, in March 2018, two producers had already achieved the target of reducing salt content to under 1.5 g/100 g for almost all their products, with salt reduction rates of between 18–80% across the products identified by CNS as high in salt. A third producer managed an overall salt reduction of between 13–44% for their high-salt products, while the fourth was working to make similar reductions.

Kuwait City is the largest settlement in the State of Kuwait, and over 98% of the national population is urban.<sup>iii</sup> Many products are produced within the city and distributed to other cities in the country. This unique characteristic has meant that through Kuwait City's work to reformulate products, the products themselves and their associated reduction in health harms can be provided to other cities across the country. It has also set a precedent for future work: CNS has begun a similar dialogue to reduce cheese salt content, and is working with the Gulf Standards Organization to establish a region-wide upper limit on salt content in cheese. If the experiences can be replicated, Kuwait City's achievements could eventually contribute to health benefits at both national and regional levels.

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<sup>i</sup> Alhamad N, Almalt E, Alamir N, Subhakaran M. An overview of salt intake reduction efforts in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. *Cardiovasc Diagn Ther.* 2015;5(3):172–7.

<sup>ii</sup> Kuwaitis lower blood pressure by reducing salt in bread. In: Health topics [website]. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2014 (<http://www.who.int/features/2014/kuwait-blood-pressure/en/>, accessed 21 January 2016).

<sup>iii</sup> Urban population of Kuwait. In: World Bank Databank [website]. Washington DC: 2019 (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?end=2017&locations=KW&start=1960&view=chart>, accessed 30 September 2019).