



香港大學  
THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG



The George Institute  
for Global Health

**Press Release**

**For Immediate Release**

HKU nutrition scientist releases first report on Salt Content in Common Packaged Food Categories in Hong Kong and new food app — FoodSwitch HK to help consumers make healthier food choices

April 17, 2018

The School of Biological Sciences at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and The George Institute for Global Health (the George Institute) jointly launched the FoodSwitch HK app which reveals how healthy or unhealthy a product is just by scanning its barcode with a smartphone.

FoodSwitch was launched by the George Institute in Australia in 2012 and has been downloaded more than 650,000 times. It is now up and running in India, the UK, New Zealand, South Africa, China and America.

Professor Bruce Neal of the George Institute said FoodSwitch is about empowering shoppers to follow the healthiest diet possible. The institute is an affiliate of UNSW Sydney. It conducts clinical, population and health system research aimed at changing health practice and policy worldwide.

Professor Neal said: "We know that food labels can be really hard to understand. But, if you see a red warning pop up highlighting a product is high in salt, sugar or fat, it's much easier to put it back on the shelf and opt for a healthier option."

The Hong Kong database, created by Dr Jimmy Louie, Assistant Professor in Food and Nutritional Science at the HKU School of Biological Sciences, contains information on nearly 13,000 products sold in major supermarket chain stores with regular updates on the items.

Dr Louie said FoodSwitch would help address the obesity epidemic in Hong Kong. "More than half of adults in Hong Kong<sup>1</sup> are now overweight or obese and we believe that's largely because of the foods they are being increasingly exposed to. More and more people are eating processed foods which are laden in sugar, fat and salt. If we can cause consumers to stop and think, that we hope will lead to the food industry to start making healthier foods." He said.

Based on the Hong Kong database, researchers have produced the first report on salts levels in common processed foods in the city. High sodium intake in diet is considered a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease. In the report, four commonly consumed products – noodles, processed fish and meats and sauces. In the report, four commonly consumed products, namely noodles, processed fish and meats and sauces, with over 2,000 food items were analysed. Findings revealed a typical serve provided one third of the World Health

Organisation (WHO)'s recommended amount of salt for just one day. The report also revealed the saltiest noodles surveyed contained 20 grams of salt in just one serve – four times the WHO target.

#### REPORT KEY FINDINGS

- An average serve of processed fish contains 30% of the maximum daily salt intake
- Switching from the saltiest processed meat to the least salty would save almost 10 grams of salt, or two teaspoons per 100 grams.
- Some canned fish contain more than 125 x more salt than others.
- An average serve of noodles with sauce contains more than 70% of the maximum daily salt intake.
- The saltiest sauce has 3 grams of salt in per 5 grams serve – 60% of the maximum daily salt intake.

The WHO recommended daily salt intake is just 5 grams<sup>2</sup> of salt or less a day, yet Hongkongers are estimated to be eating up to double that amount.

Dr Louie said: "It's not the salt we use whilst cooking that is the biggest source of salt in our diet; it's the hidden salt in processed foods including cereals, soups and dim sum that is pushing up our daily salt intake to very worrying levels. Salt is the one of the biggest contributors to high blood pressure, a risk factor for stroke and heart attack."

Consumers will also be able to take part in a crowdsourcing campaign to expand the FoodSwitch database. If they scan a product not in the database, they will be prompted to take a photo of the food item so it can be checked and added to FoodSwitch.

Professor Neal said the FoodSwitch team in Australia worked with supermarket giant Woolworths to reformulate their own brand products and have reduced salt by 30% from their ready meal range. A trial also saw people with cardiovascular disease reduce their daily salt intake by 0.7 grams by modifying their shopping habits through FoodSwitch.

"We will constantly be adding in products into the database so that we can keep a watchful eye on Hong Kong's food supply. Our researchers will identify the unhealthiest products and work with the food industry to deliver products lower in salt, sugar and fat." He added.

FoodSwitch can be downloaded for free at App Store for iPhone or Google Play for Android.



Website: <https://www.georgeinstitute.org/projects/foodswitch-hong-kong>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201711/27/P2017112700588.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs393/en/>

## About Dr Jimmy Louie

Dr Jimmy Louie is an Assistant Professor in Food and Nutritional Sciences at the School of Biological Sciences, Dr Louie's research interests span from public health nutrition and nutritional epidemiology to medical nutrition therapy and nutritional sciences. On the nutritional epidemiology side, Jimmy is experienced in performing secondary analyses on large cohort datasets and national nutrition surveys; on the public health nutrition side he was involved in projects related to front-of-pack labelling. He is also collaborating with the George Institute for Global Health to conduct research into the nutritional quality of the Australian and Hong Kong food supply.

Website: <https://hkunutrition.wixsite.com/site/the-pi>

## About The George Institute for Global Health

The George Institute for Global Health conducts clinical, population and health system research aimed at changing health practice and policy worldwide. Established in Australia and affiliated with UNSW Sydney, the Institute today also has offices in China, India and the United Kingdom, and is also affiliated with Peking University Health Science Centre and the University of Oxford.

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Image download and illustration: <http://www.scifac.hku.hk/news/media?page=1>



Image 1.

The new Foodswitch HK app will help consumers choose healthier food and drinks in the supermarket – at a glance.



Image 2.

Foodswitch HK highlights the fat, salt, sugar and energy content through a colour coded, traffic light system – unhealthy products flash up as red, healthy products are marked green and middling ones flash up as amber. The free tool offers up a healthier alternative when available.



Image 3.

Foodswitch HK provides overall ratings of scanned food and drinks available in the supermarket. It also lists the ratings of healthier alternatives when available.



Images 4 to 6.

Dr Jimmy Louie of HKU School of Biological Sciences introducing the rating function of Foodswitch HK and the first report on salts levels in common processed foods in the city.