



Bread laid bare

Freshly-baked bread smells delicious – but some loaves are twice as salty as others

Like three in ten English people, Which? member Dr Wayne Sunman (above) needs to avoid salty foods because of his high blood pressure. That's easier said than done when bread typically accounts for between a fifth and a quarter of your salt intake.

Too much salt raises your risk of high blood pressure (hypertension) and, with that, heart disease and stroke. Food watchdog the Food Standards Agency (FSA) recommends that adults limit their salt intake to 6g – about a teaspoonful – a day.

Prepackaged bread usually labels its sodium content – just multiply this by 2.5 to get the salt level. But with fresh bakery bread there are no labels you can check.

Fresh bread on test

We decided to test salt levels in supermarket bakery loaves. We chose a typical white loaf and a 'healthier' granary or wholemeal loaf from six supermarkets' in-store

bakeries (see 'Our research', below right).

The bakery bread we tested averaged at about 0.9g of salt/100g of bread – that's about 7.5g in a large (800g) loaf. However, this hides some wide variations between loaves and between separate samples from the same loaf.

For all the brands we tested, salt varied by up to 0.5g/100g between samples of the same loaf – so you might be wise to use our maximum figures (see chart, below).

Asda's granary tin had the least salt on average – at 0.5g/100g. That's less than half the salt in the four saltiest loaves: both Morrisons' loaves, Sainsbury's white sandwich and Tesco's granary averaged 1.1g of salt per 100g of bread.

All the bakery bread we tested fell within the 'amber' range under the FSA's traffic-light system for food labelling. That's neither high (red) nor within the green-light range of 0.3g/100g or less.

When we called the supermarkets'

Asda's granary tin had less than half the salt of the saltiest loaves we tested

customer service lines to ask how much salt they thought these bakery loaves contained, four came back with answers. Sainsbury's was spot on for its white sandwich loaf but slightly underestimated the salt in its harvest grain. Tesco's answers also closely matched the figures we found.

Waitrose overestimated the salt in its wholemeal loaf by 20 per cent compared with our tests, while Asda overestimated by 60 per cent for its white sandwich loaf, and told us its granary had nearly three times the salt we found.

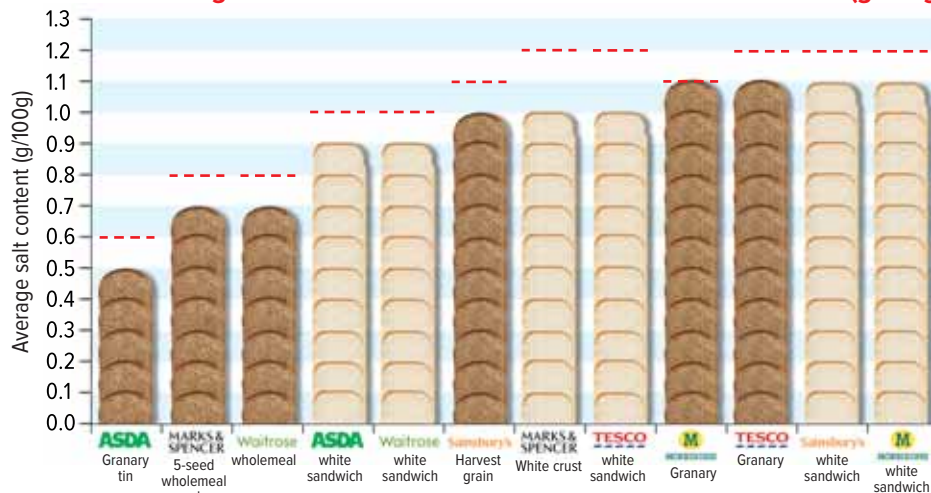
Morrisons said it couldn't specify a figure, because salt varies between stores, while Marks & Spencer couldn't respond in time for our deadline.

How is salt controlled?

We called each supermarket officially to ask how they made their bread and controlled salt content. All but Morrisons responded, telling us they monitor salt levels closely to ensure consistency. Asda and Tesco add sachets of pre-mixed ingredients – including salt – to the bread mix, while Marks & Spencer uses computerised scales.

HOW SALT STACKS UP IN BAKERY BREAD

Chart shows average salt content. Red dotted line indicates the maximum (g/100g)



OUR RESEARCH

In September 2007, we chose a white and brown loaf from in-store bakeries at Asda, Marks & Spencer, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose (12 loaves in all).

We tested the salt content of six samples of each loaf, working out the average, maximum and minimum salt content and rounding results to one decimal place. In the same month we checked the labelled sodium content of 40 prepackaged loaves.

Asda, Sainsbury's and Tesco make their own bread from scratch in store. They use the Chorleywood breadmaking process – which mechanically mixes the dough at high speed to develop it in minutes rather than hours. Marks & Spencer and Waitrose told us they make their dough off site using traditional methods and ship it into stores for baking.

Salt in prepackaged bread

To see how salt levels in fresh bread compared with those in prepackaged bread, we checked the labels of 40 leading and own-brand sliced, off-the-shelf loaves. On average, they contained just over 1g of salt per 100g – or about 8.5g of salt per 800g loaf – a little higher than we found in bakery bread.

We can't compare salt content by slice because thickness varies, but typically 100g is slightly more than two and a half slices of medium-sliced bread.

Overall, brown bread is practically as salty as white bread, and premium loaves are as salty as standard loaves. Of the 40 loaves we looked at, Marks & Spencer's multigrain sliced loaf was lowest in salt – 0.7g/100g – while Morrisons' The Best malted farmhouse contained the most, at 1.5g/100g. So you could have twice as much of the M&S bread for the same salt intake as the Morrisons' loaf.



How much is too much?

For six-year-olds it's only half as much salt as you might think

Food watchdog the FSA recommends that over-11s and adults limit their salt to 6g a day. Limits for younger children vary with age – for example, it's 3g a day for four- to six-year-olds.

Which? member Rachel Syson is worried about how much salt her two under-sixes get from bread – even with a

healthy balanced diet. 'It's very easy to hit their recommended maximum salt intake with toast in the morning and sandwiches for tea plus their other daily consumption,' she says. 'I'd love to have the time to make my own bread with less salt.' Go to www.which.co.uk/shoppingcard to see recommended maximum salt intakes for children of all ages.

Go to www.which.co.uk/bread for more information and a full comparison of the salt levels in all the prepackaged loaves we checked.

FSA targets

The FSA wants to reduce salt in prepackaged and in-store bakery bread to 1.1g/100g by 2010. The good news is nearly 60 per cent of the prepackaged loaves we looked at meet this initial target, as do almost all the bakery loaves we tested.

The food watchdog plans to check industry progress early this year with a view to possibly setting more demanding targets.

'The industry has already reduced salt in bread by around one third since the 1980s,' an FSA spokeswoman told us. 'Retailers are also working to reduce salt in own-brand

bread; for example, Sainsbury's standard sliced bread – one of the top three products in Sainsbury's shoppers' baskets – has already met FSA targets.'

Dough it yourself solution

If you want ultimate control over how much salt is in your bread, you could follow Dr Sunman's example and bake it yourself, though his salt-free recipe didn't go down well with his wife.

'She prefers the taste of a loaf made with half a teaspoon – that's about 0.5g/100g of salt – and plausibly better tasting than a full teaspoon,' says Dr Sunman.

Look out for our bread makers report in July or go to www.bpassoc.org.uk for the Blood Pressure Association's range of salt-free recipes.



Your bread questions answered

You wanted to know what defines bread as organic, how crustless bread is made and why supermarkets don't label their bakery bread

Q Why does bread contain salt?

A The Federation of Bakers (FOB) says that salt is needed for taste. It also limits the growth of bacteria, yeast and moulds. But our bread analysis suggests some makers may be adding more than they need to.

Q What's the best way to store bread?

A At room temperature, says the FOB – ideally 17°C/63°F. Keeping it in a fridge makes it go stale more quickly – with one day equivalent to three days at room temperature. But

you can freeze bread for up to three months. Defrost at room temperature if possible, as microwave defrosting can dry it out. Store packaged bread in its wrapper and unwrapped, crusty



bread in a non-airtight container to keep the crust crisp.

Q What are the regulations on organic bread?

A Under EU law, manufacturers can use up to 5 per cent of certain authorised non-organic food ingredients and still label bread as organic. But genetically modified ingredients are banned from organic foods.

Q Where do the crusts on crustless bread go?

A Tempting as it is to imagine a lakeful of ducks getting fat on painstakingly removed

crusts, Hovis says it gently bakes the bread in special tins at a lower heat, so the surface does not get hot enough for a crust to form.

Q Why don't bakeries list ingredients and nutrients in their bread?

A Only prepackaged foods must by law show their ingredients. And foods need to give detailed nutritional breakdowns only if they're making health claims, such as 'low fat'. Fresh bakery bread generally falls outside both these categories so it doesn't need ingredients or nutritional labels.