Does salt really raise your blood pressure?

By ACSH Staff — December 5, 2012

It has long been said that salt contributes to high blood pressure and thus, the government’s dietary guidelines recommend that the general population consume less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day (about a teaspoon of table salt). This relationship, while unequivocally accepted by almost all of the public health and cardiology authorities, is again being questioned; it may be the case that these recommendations are not warranted for everyone.

Ronald Bayer, PhD and his colleagues from Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, in a new review article [1] published in Health Affairs, cited several studies appearing in the Journal of the American Medical Association and the Cochrane Review, among various others, that found little or no relationship with all-cause mortality and salt reduction. And although most of the evidence used to support this connection was weak, according to Bayer and his team, the campaign to reduce salt in the American diet has almost become a part of the language, as it has been eagerly taken up by various government agencies and public health NGOs.

The Columbia investigators warn against these kind of recommendations, saying that science must remain open, skeptical, and concerned, and that concealment of scientific uncertainty is a mistake that serves neither the ends of science nor good policy. Judgment and values must play in evidence-informed policy making.

In the end, ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, says that it’s almost as if the blanket sodium reduction is a protective measure, as if people cannot handle the nuanced truth. These authors should be commended for daring to challenge the received wisdom while pointing out that adhering to a pre-ordained dogma that is not well supported by evidence is the opposite of good science policy.