

Salt, Sodium, and Your Health

Learn the facts about sodium and a healthy diet.

We all know what salt is, but what does it have to do with our health? The salt in our shakers at home is made up of about 40% sodium. In small amounts, sodium is essential for the body to work properly, but today most people are getting more sodium than they need. Too much sodium affects our health and can cause serious issues.

Experts recommend that healthy adults eat no more than about 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium per day (that's about 1 teaspoon of salt). Many of us consume more than twice this amount. That's one of the reasons why about 1 in 3 Americans now have high blood pressure, a serious health problem.

Why is too much a problem?

Many people make the mistake of thinking that the amount of salt or sodium they eat doesn't really matter. But eating too much sodium may cause health problems that you may not feel. Problems include high blood pressure and heart disease. This happens because excess sodium can cause an unhealthy increase in the levels of fluid in our bodies. This affects our health by making organs like the heart and kidneys work harder which over time can increase your risk for serious health problems.



Why are we getting so much?

Salt tastes great. It adds flavor to our foods and helps to keep many foods from spoiling. For these reasons it seems to be everywhere, in foods that we know are salty but also in foods that most people would never think were high in sodium.

Many people are surprised to learn that most of the sodium in our diets does not come from the salt we sprinkle on our foods. About three

quarters of the sodium we eat comes from processed foods straight from the package. Some of these processed foods, like potato chips, pretzels and other snacks are obviously salty. But many other processed foods that are high in sodium don't even taste salty.

Where does it come from?

You may be surprised by the large amounts of sodium in certain everyday foods. Some frozen dinners, canned vegetables and soups for example contain as much as 1,200 mg per serving. Just one tablespoon of soy sauce can have up to 1,000 mg. That's about half your recommended daily limit in one small serving.

Sodium shows up in many unexpected places, even in foods that are not salty. Catsup and ready-to eat cereals are classic examples. Sodium is also found in baked goods like cakes and pies and many breads, crackers and rolls.

While you may have heard that processed meats, cheeses and cold cuts can be high in sodium, many are surprised that a 3 ounce serving of ham typically contains more than 1,000 mg. With so many popular high-sodium foods, it's easy to go over the recommended 2,300 mg per day.

Should I be concerned?

Some people are more sensitive to the effects of too much sodium. African Americans, people with high blood pressure, and people over the age of 50 are at higher risk than the general population. Even if you're not in one of the "sensitive" groups, we should all be aware and try to keep our sodium intake in check for good health. Recent research shows that reducing our sodium intake can help reduce the risk of suffering from heart attack and stroke.

What can I do?

Keep track: Keep track of the amount of sodium in your foods and don't forget to include the sodium from everything you eat – even foods and beverages that you don't think of as salty. Aim to get no more than the recommended 2,300 mg per day.

Read labels: Choose foods that have less than 20% of the recommended daily value for sodium. These foods can be labeled as very low-sodium (35 mg or less), low-sodium (contains 140 mg or less), or reduced sodium (25% less sodium than usual). Identify hidden sources of sodium on food labels such as monosodium glutamate (MSG), sodium nitrate, and baking soda. Remember foods that are processed will have higher amounts of sodium than fresh foods like fruits and vegetables, minimally processed whole-grains and lean meat.

Don't go 'cold turkey': It can be helpful to make gradual changes to reduce sodium in your diet. This will make it easier for you to stick with it in the long run. For example start by replacing cold cuts like ham with fresh proteins like grilled chicken or roasted turkey. Also look for lower sodium canned goods.

Know your risks: If you fall into one of the high-risk groups or have diabetes or kidney disease, reduce your intake to about 1,500 mg per day. You can do this by eating mainly fresh, unprocessed foods, using spices and herbs instead of salt, and avoiding high-sodium packaged foods like chips, canned foods, frozen-dinners, and certain lunch meats.

Cook Smart: Use low or no sodium ingredients like garlic and onions, lemon juice, pepper, fresh dill, parsley, thyme, paprika, ginger or low-sodium broths or salsas to boost flavor.

Eat Smart: Whether you are dining in or dining out sodium can sneak its way into your meals and sometimes in high amounts. Reduce the amount of sodium in your meals by following these tips:

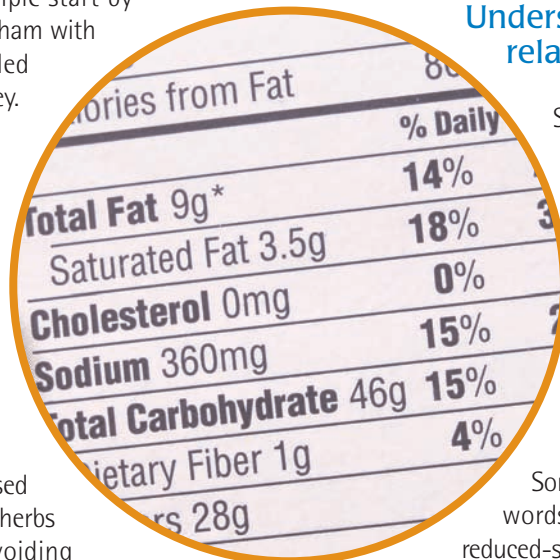
- Prepare or order foods without salt
- Don't salt your foods at the table
- Limit condiments like soy sauce, steak sauce, and relish
- Remember that garlic salt, onion salt, and sea salt are still high in sodium
- Avoid high-sodium sauces such as barbeque, alfredo, and teriyaki
- Avoid vegetables soaked in high sodium marinades
- Limit fast-food which is usually high in sodium

Snack Smart: Snacks like chips, pretzels, and salted nuts are packed with sodium. They can add up and put you well over the recommended amount of sodium for the day. Instead try healthier options with less sodium like fruits, veggies, unsalted nuts or trail-mix, low-fat yogurt, or low-sodium whole wheat crackers.

Understanding sodium related buzzwords:

Sea salt has become a trendy way to try to cut-back on sodium. While sea salt may have a different taste and texture than table salt, the sodium content is about the same, so it should still be used sparingly.

Some other frequently used words such as low-sodium, reduced-sodium, or no salt added are put on packages to help you find foods with less sodium. These can be helpful when choosing foods but try to remember the bottom line. The best way to reduce sodium in your diet is to put down the shaker; limit processed foods, and stick with fresh foods that are naturally low in sodium like fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Being sodium smart can make a real difference in your health.



Since everyone's health history and nutritional needs are so different, please make sure that you talk with your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.



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