



WORTH YOUR SALT

LOWERING SODIUM
INTAKE TO IMPROVE
BLOOD PRESSURE & HEALTH

Salt, a favorite flavor and seasoning, has been used as a food preservative since ancient times and is a source of the essential nutrients sodium and chlorine. These minerals help control water balance and regulate blood volume and pressure. Table salt often contains iodine (iodized salt), a necessary nutrient for thyroid gland function. Today, salt added to foods is considered the main culprit behind the prevalence of high blood pressure in the U.S. and around the world.

The Salt-Sodium Connection

Salt is often used to mean sodium, even though less than half of salt is sodium. Watching the sodium content on food labels tells you how much sodium is in a serving. Limiting the salt you add during cooking and at the table helps lower sodium intake and blood pressure substantially.

High Blood Pressure

Nearly one in three American adults has high blood pressure* (hypertension), with the numbers continuing to rise. The condition occurs more often in African-Americans, individuals who are overweight or obese, men and people older than 60. Nearly three-quarters of people with hypertension do not have their condition under control even if they are being treated for the condition. Some reasons for poor blood pressure control are not taking the prescribed antihypertensive medications, consumption of substances that interfere with blood pressure medications, such as ibuprofen, and unhealthy eating habits, including using too much salt.

Health Consequences of High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure can develop without symptoms and for that reason it is wise to check your readings regularly. High blood pressure significantly increases the chance of developing heart disease, stroke and kidney disease and has been linked to kidney calcium stones and osteoporosis. Most

experts agree that individuals with high blood pressure would likely benefit from limiting their sodium and salt intake.

Because the potential health benefits of consuming less sodium are so great, the American Heart Association, National Heart Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI), Institute of Medicine, and the World Health Organization recommend across-the-board reductions in salt (sodium) consumption.

How Much Sodium is Too Much?

Americans consume almost twice as much sodium as recommended. On average, sodium intakes are just over 3,000 mg (3 grams) per day (about 4,000 mg per day for men), with some individuals consuming much higher amounts. The Institute of Medicine recommends an upper limit of 2,300 mg—equivalent to about a teaspoon of salt—for people without hypertension or diabetes. Many adults might benefit from consuming even less than that. Most of us have no idea how much sodium (or salt) we consume, so a good approach is to learn which foods are highest in sodium and limit how much and how often you eat them.

Show Me the Salt

About three-quarters of the sodium we consume comes from manufactured and processed foods, such as soups, canned foods, prepared sauces and mixes, pickled foods, salted nuts, processed meats, some cheeses (e.g., feta), baked goods and snacks. Fast foods frequently have more than 500 mg of sodium per serving, which is about a fifth of the recommended daily intake.

Shake the Habit

Fondness for salt begins early in life, grows with age and food preferences, and increases with eating high-salt and fast foods. For these reasons, adjusting to less salty food takes time and is easiest when done gradually. Start by taking the salt shaker off the table. Instead of salty foods like condiments, most processed prepared foods and snacks, use unsalted products such as garlic powder instead of garlic salt, citrus juices or flavored vinegar and oil instead of prepared salad dressings and reduced sodium products for standard versions. Eat fewer processed and fast foods. Enjoy more fruits, vegetables, dried peas and beans and unsalted nuts, which are rich in potassium and naturally low in sodium. Potassium-rich foods, such as fresh bananas, oranges, papayas, tomatoes, cantaloupe and dried peas and beans help offset the effects of sodium and contribute to healthy water balance and desirable blood pressure.

Tips: Drain and discard the liquid from canned foods and rinse the solids under cold water to remove additional sodium. Use sodium-free soup powders instead of canned broth, which is high in sodium, even when labeled “sodium reduced.” Instead of salt, boost flavor with generous amounts of spices and flavors, e.g., herbs, wine, flavored vinegar, fresh garlic, chili powder, cumin and others. Use as many whole and unprocessed foods as possible instead of prepared, boxed, frozen or fast foods,

nearly all of which are very high in sodium. Read the nutrition labels on every food item you buy, comparing the sodium content among the different brands. The amount of sodium in mg per serving must be listed on the nutrition panel. A “low sodium” food contains no more than 140 mg per serving.

Eating Fish May Help Lower Blood Pressure

Accumulating evidence suggests that eating fish or seafood omega-3 fatty acids contributes to lower blood pressure, especially in people on weight-reducing diets or those with hypertension. In a recent study, young overweight adults on weight-loss diets who ate omega-3-rich salmon three times a week had a greater drop in diastolic blood pressure compared with those who ate lean fish over an 8-week period.

Seafood omega-3s are linked to modest decreases in blood pressure. In addition, they act on the large and small blood vessels and kidney to help lower blood pressure. Reducing salt plus increasing omega-3 intake further lowers blood pressure. In addition, omega-3s from seafood improve heart health, a major concern for people with high blood pressure.

Fresh and frozen fish without breading or seasoning are very low in sodium, approximately 60 to 100 mg/100 grams (3 ½ oz.) of cooked fish. A distinct advantage is their generous potassium content—up to eight times higher than their sodium level—which helps offset the effects of sodium. Unseasoned shellfish, such as scallops, oysters and shrimp, and canned fish usually have more sodium than fresh or frozen fish, but still have much less than breaded and fried seafood. With their generous content of omega-3 fatty acids, canned fish can be included in a well chosen diet that provides the recommended amount of sodium per day.

Americans’ high consumption of sodium, mainly from salt, is a national health concern because it contributes to high blood pressure. Most people are likely to benefit from lowering their sodium intake by eating more foods low in sodium and high in potassium, such as seafood and unprocessed fruits, vegetables and nuts. Maintaining a healthy body weight and exercising regularly also promote healthy blood pressure.

*High blood pressure is defined as a systolic blood pressure \geq 140 mm mercury (Hg), diastolic pressure \geq 90 mm Hg (140/90 mm Hg) on a consistent basis or taking antihypertensive medication. Risk of heart disease increases progressively above pressures of 115/75 mm Hg

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