

Sodium

Why reduce salt?

Americans eat more salt (sodium chloride) than they need. Having too much sodium in your diet can lead to elevated blood pressure and fluid retention. To stay healthy, it is recommended you limit your sodium intake to less than 2,000 mg daily.

How does sodium affect my heart?

When there's extra sodium in your bloodstream, it pulls water into your blood vessels, increasing the total amount (volume) of blood inside them. With more blood flowing through your blood vessels, blood pressure increases. It's like turning up the water supply to a garden hose — the pressure in the hose increases as more water is blasted through it.

Over time, high blood pressure may overstretch or injure the blood vessel walls and speed the build-up of gunky plaque that can block blood flow. The added pressure tires out the heart by forcing it to work harder to pump blood through the body. And the extra water in your body can lead to bloating and weight gain. The process leads to elevated blood pressure.

Even if you don't already have high blood pressure, eating less sodium can help blunt the rise in blood pressure that occurs with age. It can also reduce your risk of heart attack, heart failure, stroke and kidney disease.

Where does all the sodium come from?

Table salt is a combination of two minerals — about 40 percent sodium and 60 percent chloride.

Approximate amounts of sodium in a given amount of salt:

- 1/4 teaspoon salt = 575 mg sodium
- 1/2 teaspoon salt = 1,150 mg sodium
- 3/4 teaspoon salt = 1,725 mg sodium
- 1 teaspoon salt = 2,300 mg sodium

More than 70 percent of the sodium we consume comes from packaged, prepared and restaurant foods. The rest of the sodium in the diet occurs naturally in food (about 15 percent) or is added when we're cooking food or sitting down to eat (about 11 percent). So even if you never use the salt shaker, you're probably getting too much sodium. Because most of the sodium you eat is in your food before you buy it, it can be hard to limit how much you're getting.

Examples of foods high in sodium:

- Bacon and 2 eggs = 929 mg
- One slice of pepperoni pizza = 1,630 mg
- Big Mac from McDonald's = 1,020 mg
- Small French fries = 190 mg



How to Season Food without Salt:

- Pepper
- Mrs. Dash seasoning
- Make your own: 4 tbsp basil, 2 tsp sage, 4 tbsp oregano, 4 tsp onion powder, 2 tsp rosemary, 1 tbsp garlic powder, 2 tsp dill, 1 tsp ground pepper. Combine all ingredients and put in an empty seasoning jar.
- Talk to your doctor before using a salt substitute as they may not be safe for people with kidney disease.

When shopping for food:

- Choose packaged and prepared foods carefully. Compare labels and choose the product with the lowest amount of sodium (per serving) you can find in your store. You might be surprised that different brands of the same food can have different sodium levels.
- Pick fresh and frozen poultry that hasn't been injected with a sodium solution. Check the fine print on the packaging for terms like "broth," "saline" or "sodium solution." Sodium levels in unseasoned fresh meats are around 100 milligrams (mg) or less per 4-ounce serving.
- Select condiments with care. For example, soy sauce, bottled salad dressings, dips, ketchup, jarred salsas, capers, mustard, pickles, olives and relish can be sky-high in sodium. Look for a reduced- or lower-sodium version.

- Opt for canned vegetables labeled "no salt added" and frozen vegetables without salty sauces. When they're added to a casserole, soup or other mixed dish, there are so many other ingredients involved that you won't miss the salt.

When preparing food:

- Drain and rinse canned beans (like chickpeas, kidney beans, etc.) and vegetables. You'll cut the sodium by up to 40 percent.
- Combine lower-sodium versions of food with regular versions. If you don't like the taste of lower-sodium foods right now, try combining them in equal parts with a regular version of the same food. You'll get less salt and probably won't notice much difference in taste. This works especially well for broths, soups and tomato-based pasta sauces.
- Cook pasta, rice and hot cereal without salt. You're likely going to add other flavorful ingredients, so you won't miss the salt.
- Cook by grilling, braising, roasting, searing and sautéing to bring out natural flavors. This will reduce the need to add salt.
- Incorporate foods with potassium like sweet potatoes, potatoes, greens, tomatoes and lower-sodium tomato sauce, white beans, kidney beans, nonfat yogurt, oranges, bananas and cantaloupe. Potassium helps counter the effects of sodium and may help lower your blood pressure.

At restaurants:

- Ask for your dish to be made without extra salt.
- Taste your food before adding salt. If you think it needs a boost of flavor, add freshly ground black pepper or a squeeze of fresh lemon or lime and test it again before adding salt.
- Watch out for these food words: pickled, brined, barbecued, cured, smoked, broth, au jus, soy sauce, miso or teriyaki sauce. These tend to be high in sodium. Foods that are steamed, baked, grilled, poached or roasted may have less sodium.
- Control portion sizes. When you cut calories, you usually cut the sodium too. Ask if smaller portions are available or place half the meal in the box to eat later.

Ask about the sodium content of the menu items. Most restaurants are required to provide nutrition information, including sodium content, to customers upon request.

Is my food going to taste bland with less salt?

Over time, your taste buds can adjust to liking less salt. Studies show that when people follow a lower-sodium diet, they start to prefer it, and that the foods they used to enjoy taste too salty.

Updated: 20200605



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