

# In the News

**Pinch the salt**

## **Even if you've forsaken the shaker, you're probably consuming too much sodium**

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Over the last few years, we've been so busy counting carbs, fretting over fat and pumping up protein, that we've overlooked an important dietary concern: salt.

It's not that salt is a bad thing. It's necessary in the human diet to help balance body fluids and for efficient muscle and nerve function. The problem is, it's just not needed in the amounts Americans consume it.

The U.S. Dietary Guidelines of 2005 recommend that healthy adults consume no more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium (when combined with chloride, it forms salt), about one teaspoon of salt a day. And, for some people, including those over 50, African-Americans, and people who already have high blood pressure and are sensitive to sodium, the recommended daily intake is a measly 1,500 milligrams or less.

Most of us go way overboard and eat between 4,000 and 5,000 milligrams of sodium every day, at least twice the recommended amount.

Feeling virtuous because you don't sprinkle salt on your popcorn or potatoes? Shake off that smug grin. Chances are you're getting more than your share of sodium if you dine in restaurants or eat any kind of processed, frozen or fast-foods. That's where more than 80 percent of the sodium in our diet comes from.

Had a slice of pizza lately? Chances are it had more than 900 milligrams of sodium in one big pepperoni slice. Watching your weight with the help of low-calorie frozen dinners? Lean Cuisine and Healthy Choice products may trim the fat, but they splurge on sodium, often containing 600 to 900 milligrams of sodium per entree.

A fast-food cheeseburger and fries can put you into sodium overload with about 2,000 milligrams of sodium, almost an entire day's worth in one meal. Even breakfast has gotten sodium-saturated, with a bowl of Cheerios racking up 200 milligrams of salt.

The problem with too much sodium is that for some people, it can lead to high blood pressure, which increases the risk of stroke, kidney disease and heart problems.

"For sodium-sensitive people, the more salt they take in, the more the kidneys compensate and retain water. This increases blood volume, which requires the heart to work harder, and consequently raises blood pressure," says Christine Zoumas, a registered dietitian and researcher at the University of California San Diego.

About 10 percent to 25 percent of the U.S. population is sodium sensitive, and approximately 60 percent of people with hypertension are sodium sensitive.

"Not everyone responds to a low-sodium diet. Reducing salt doesn't necessarily guarantee reduced blood pressure for everyone," says Dr. Joseph Scherger, physician and professor of family and preventive medicine at the University of California San Diego.

However, he still tries to get even his young, healthy patients to halt the salt habit.

“It will get them in trouble as they get older. As we age, our heart weakens, and a weakened heart can't tolerate high salt volume. It will begin to fail,” he says, noting that about 40 percent of people over 40 have high blood pressure.

While tossing out the table-salt shaker can help slightly, it's the food in grocery stores, fast-food outlets and restaurants that we need to be wary of. However, determining how much sodium is in a food isn't as simple as just tasting it. High-sodium foods don't necessarily taste salty.

“Breakfast cereals and some wheat breads have a lot of sodium, but you'd never know it unless you read the label,” says Joan Rupp, a registered dietitian and instructor at San Diego State University's Department of Exercise and Nutrition Science.

Be a diligent label reader, she suggests. Look for the words “salt,” “sodium,” or any derivative of the word, such as “monosodium gluconate.”

“It all means salt,” Rupp says.

Adding to the confusion is the wide variation in sodium content in similar foods by different manufacturers or fast-food chains. Just as with fat and carbohydrate content, it all depends on the individual recipe. Check out the difference in the amount of sodium in McDonald's and Burger King French fries

Reducing salt in processed food isn't an easy trick for manufacturers. Salt does more than make food taste good. It's a preservative and gives food a longer shelf life. It's also a flavor enhancer, especially needed by many of the low-carb and low-fat foods to combat blandness.

The American Medical Association recently asked food processors and restaurants to voluntarily reduce by half the sodium in their foods over the next 10 years. The group also urged the Food and Drug Association to label high-sodium foods. Currently, the FDA classifies salt as “generally recognized as safe” and prefers a voluntary approach to reductions.

The good news is that if you cut back on salt, you'll get used to it. Even “salt addicts” find that they eventually adjust and come to enjoy a whole new world of natural, wholesome flavors.

“We develop a taste for sodium over time. But, you can retrain your taste buds and unlearn the taste for sodium,” Rupp says.

She recommends a gradual reduction plan, starting by taking away the salt shaker from the table, then eliminating it from cooking, then cutting back on processed foods.

“Pretty soon those (high-sodium processed) foods you used to eat will just taste way too salty to you,” she says.