

Reducing the Sodium in Your Diet

Have you been instructed to decrease the amount of sodium in your diet? You aren't alone. Many Americans are becoming sodium conscious. In the 2000 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the U.S. Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and Health and Human Services recommend that we choose and prepare foods with less salt.

WHAT IS SODIUM?

Sodium is a mineral needed by the human body for regulation of fluid balance, contraction of muscles and conduction of nerve impulses. To maintain the sodium/water balance, excess sodium is removed via the kidneys. Table salt contains sodium.

WHERE DOES SODIUM IN OUR DIET COME FROM?

The major sources of sodium in our diets are processed, prepared foods and the salt we add to food during cooking or at meals. Sodium also comes from a variety of other sources. Baking soda, some seasonings, antacids, and condiments can contain large amounts of sodium. Some prescription and over-the-counter drugs also contain sodium. Reading food and medication labels prior to purchase will help you make low sodium choices.

WHY IS IT NECESSARY TO FOLLOW A LOWER SODIUM EATING PATTERN?

The human adult needs 500 to 1000 milligrams of sodium per day. A daily sodium intake between 1,100 and 3,300 milligrams is considered safe and adequate. This is equal to the amount of sodium in approximately ½ to 1½ teaspoons of table salt. In actuality, the average American consumes 2,500 to 5,000 milligrams per day. Reducing sodium in the diet may reduce high blood pressure in some people. This in turn can decrease the likelihood of heart or kidney disease and stroke. A low-sodium diet may need to be combined with weight loss and exercise or medication to decrease blood pressure.

Taste for salt is acquired. Like drinking diet soft drinks and decreasing use of sugar, taste for salt can be relearned. By cutting down on salt use gradually, the taste buds have time to adjust.

WAYS TO DECREASE YOUR SODIUM INTAKE

The best way to cut back on sodium is to cut back on salt and salty foods and seasonings. When reading a Nutrition Facts Label, look for the sodium content.

Additionally:

- Cook from scratch. De-emphasize the use of processed foods.
- Use the salt shaker sparingly. Taste your food before adding salt. Remove the salt shaker from your table or get a shaker with smaller holes.
- Choose fresh, frozen, or canned vegetables without added salt.
- Choose fresh or frozen fish, shellfish, poultry, and meat more often than canned or processed forms.
- Snack on fresh fruits and vegetables, which are low in sodium.
- Balance a high sodium food with others of low sodium content. Limit processed, cured or pickled foods.
- Read the Nutrition Facts Label to compare the amount of sodium in processed foods - such as frozen dinners, packaged mixes, cereals, cheese, breads, soups, salad dressings, and sauces. The amount of sodium in different types and brands often varies widely.

- Ask your grocer or supermarket to offer more low-sodium foods.
- Try to keep your daily sodium intake below 2500 mg.
- Read food labels. Buy products low in sodium, MSG, baking soda and other sodium-containing compounds.
- Choose foods labeled "low-sodium, " "reduced sodium" or "sodium free."
- Take note of the sodium content of your favorite condiments, particularly meat tenderizer, steak sauce, soy sauce, salsa, and catsup.
- Use alternate spices and herbs to season your food. Fresh vegetable and citrus juices work great too.
- Some people can use salt substitutes. These are high in potassium so people with kidney or other medical problems may not be able to use them. Ask your physician first.
- Try seasoning mixes such as Mrs. Dash or Mr. Pepper.
- Choose nonprescription medications low in sodium. Ask your pharmacist about the sodium content of your prescription medication.
- When you go out to eat, choose low sodium menu items and ask that they prepare your meal without salt or MSG. Use pepper instead of salt to season your meal.

WHAT DO FOOD LABELS TELL US?

Do the terms "sodium" or "salt" appear on the front of the food label? If so, here's what the descriptions mean. For the specific sodium content in a serving, check the Nutrition Facts panel.

LABEL TERM	MEANS	EXAMPLES of FOODS
Sodium free	Less than 5 milligrams sodium per serving	Crackers
Very low sodium	35 milligrams or less sodium per serving	Chips
Low sodium	140 milligrams or less sodium per serving	Soup, cereal, crackers
Reduced or less sodium	At least 25% less sodium*	Soy sauce, soup, bacon, pretzels, crackers
Light in sodium	50% less sodium*; restricted to foods with more than 40 calories per serving or more that 3 grams fat per serving	Crackers
Salt free	Less than 5 milligrams sodium per serving	Herb blends
Low sodium meal	140 milligrams or less sodium per 100 grams	Frozen dinner
Unsalted or no added	No salt added during processing; does not necessarily mean	Peanuts, butter, canned vegetable, microwave popcorn,

	sodium free	crackers, breakfast cereals
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*as compared with a standard serving size of the traditional food

References: American Dietetic Association, Complete Food and Nutrition Guide, RL Duyff, 1998.