

How Much Salt Is Too Much?

Medical experts have debated the health risks associated with salt (sodium chloride) intake for decades. The prevailing opinion has been that restricting salt in the diet can help prevent, or reverse, high blood pressure (hypertension) and the related risks for heart disease.

The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends a modest sodium intake of 2,400 mg daily. That's well below the 3,500 mg consumed by the average American.

Some critics have argued that this restriction is unnecessary for the population as a whole. They maintain that salt restriction is important only for people who are sensitive to sodium. This includes people who may have high blood pressure or diabetes, obese individuals, older adults and anyone of African American descent.

Others, however, will argue that most doctors and health organizations don't go far enough with restrictions. The DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) II study found that people with high blood pressure who ate a healthy diet and limited their sodium intake to 1,500 mg (or 900 mg below the AHA recommendations) reduced their systolic pressure (the first number of a blood pressure) by 11.5 points and their diastolic pressure (the second number of a blood pressure) by 5.5 points.

That's similar to the results achieved by taking blood pressure medications. If your blood pressure is not normal, restricting your salt intake may prevent problems in the future. If you have high blood pressure, it may allow your physician to lower or eliminate your need for medication.

To reduce your salt intake, recent research recommends the following precautions:

- **Know the sodium content of the foods you eat.** Processed foods, frozen dinners and soups are usually high in sodium. Whole grain and breakfast cereals may contain sodium in the amount of 200 mg or more and low fat or "diet" foods are not necessarily low in sodium. It is essential to check the labels of your foods and keep a running tally of your daily intake.
- **Try not to use the salt shaker.** Foods absorb salt as they cook. Using the salt shaker while cooking reduces the intensity of the salt flavor and encourages us to use salt when the food is on the plate. If you feel the need to add salt, do so at the table where even a small amount will provide a salty taste. Using more garlic, curry, lime juice or onions will spice up your foods and enhance the flavor without adding sodium. You can also shake a little kelp (usually sold at health food stores) onto your foods to give it a little more flavor without adding additional sodium. Foods cooked without salt will taste a little flat at first but your taste buds will adjust over time.
- **Don't be fooled by advertising gimmicks.** The amount of sodium (in mg) per serving will be listed in the nutrition box on the food label.

- **Sodium free** means it contains less than 5 mg of sodium per serving.
- **Very low sodium** contains 35 mg or less per serving.
- **Low sodium** contains less than 140 mg per serving.
- **Light in sodium** contains at least 50% less sodium than the regular product.
- **Reduced sodium** contains at least 25% less sodium than the regular product.
- **When eating out, order wisely.** Many restaurant entrees are full of sodium. Most people know that Chinese food is brimming with sodium, but not everyone knows that the restaurant bread is high in sodium too.

The DASH II recommendations (assuming that you are eating a 2,000 calorie/day diet) are as follows:

- Seven or eight daily servings of whole grains, such as bread, pasta or dried cereal.
- Four or five daily servings of fruits.
- Four or five daily servings of vegetables.
- Two or three daily servings of low or nonfat dairy products such as cheese, yogurt or milk.
- No more than two daily servings of fish or lean meat.
- Four or five weekly servings of nuts, seeds or legumes.
- No more than five weekly servings of sweets (including jams).

Following the above recommendations yields a diet naturally low in sodium and one that is heart healthy.