

# Mastering Food Choices

## Shaking Down on Sodium

**S**odium is an important mineral to the body. It helps keep body fluids in balance, helps the body absorb certain nutrients, aids in muscle performance, and contributes to nerve activity. Excessive sodium in the diet is linked to high blood pressure or hypertension. Hypertension can contribute to diabetes, heart disease, kidney failure, and stroke.

The connection between salt and high blood pressure is complicated, but moderate use during childhood does not appear to put children at risk.

Sodium and salt are mistakenly thought to be the same ingredient. Actually, sodium is a mineral, and salt is a naturally occurring chemical compound made up of 40 percent sodium and 60 percent chloride. Salt is a major source of sodium in the diet.

### Check This Out

- The body needs less than 500 milligrams of sodium, or one teaspoon of salt, per day.



- The average American consumes more than seven times the amount of sodium they need each day.
- The American Heart Association recommends a maximum daily intake of 2,400 milligrams of sodium, or about one teaspoon, of salt per day.
- Look for low sodium recipes. There are a variety of good cookbooks that feature low sodium choices.
- Cut out or cut back on salt in cooking water.
- Try no-salt or reduced sodium spice mixes.
- Look for condiments and sauces with less sodium.
- Learn to use spices and herbs for added flavor.
- Rinse canned beans and vegetables, and cook in tap water.

### When You Cook

- Plan meals that contain less sodium.
- Balance low and high sodium choices.
- Gradually reduce salt in favorite recipes. Most can be reduced by half or more.

### At the Table

- Taste food before you salt.
- Use one shake instead of two.

Salt is an acquired taste. Our taste buds will adjust to less and less salt.

- Beware of added sauces and condiments. These are usually very high in sodium.
- When Eating Out
- Choose food without sauce or ask for the sauce on the side.
- Ask for food served without added salt.
- Balance low and high sodium choices.
- Avoid soups and Asian foods, which are traditionally high in salt.
- Beware of fast food; it is often very high in sodium.

## Where Is the Sodium?

### *Processed Foods*

- A quarter to half of the sodium in the diet is added during the processing of foods.
- Sodium is added for seasoning, leavening, and preservation.

### *Table Salt*

- About a third of the sodium in the diet is added in the form of salt during food preparation or at the table.

### *Natural Content*

- Most foods in their natural state contain some sodium;

however, most unprocessed, unseasoned food is generally low in sodium.

- Only about 10 percent of the sodium in the average American diet occurs naturally in foods.

## Read Food Labels

- Check for added sodium on food labels. Key words or symbols include salt, sodium, soda, Na<sup>+</sup>, NaCl, MSG, and brine.
- When shopping, look for specific claims, such as low in sodium or reduced sodium.
- Choose fresh foods over processed foods. Generally, there is more sodium in canned vegetables and fruits than in frozen and more sodium in frozen than in fresh. Fresh food is best when avoiding added sodium.
- Sodium, usually in the form of salt, is added to most processed or prepared convenience foods, such as soup, salad dressing, canned or dry dinner mixes, sauces and condiments, dessert mixes, canned vegetables, frozen entrees, and processed meats.
- Pickled foods, packed in vinegar and/or brine, are exceptionally high in sodium.
- Some varieties of cookies, ready-to-eat cereals, cheese,

and colas contain sodium.

- Sodium occurs naturally in drinking water; softened water contains more.
- Medication can be a source of hidden sodium. Check with your doctor or pharmacist concerning the use of antacids, seltzers, laxatives, aspirin, and other non-prescription drugs.

## References

Institute of Medicine (2013). Sodium Intake in Populations: Assessment of Evidence.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.ezproxy.uky.edu/pmc/articles/PMC3884094/>

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (2015). The Facts on Sodium and High Blood Pressure.

<http://www.eatright.org/resource/health/wellness/heart-and-cardiovascular-health/the-facts-on-sodium-and-high-blood-pressure>

American Heart Association (2017). Sodium and Salt. [http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/HealthyLiving/HealthyEating/Nutrition/Sodium-and-Salt\\_UCM\\_303290\\_Article.jsp#.WnxuVSUbuOUk](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/HealthyLiving/HealthyEating/Nutrition/Sodium-and-Salt_UCM_303290_Article.jsp#.WnxuVSUbuOUk)

*By Sandra Bastin, Extension Food & Nutrition Specialist; revised by Heather L. Norman-Burgdorf, Assistant Extension Professor, January 2018*