

# Shaking Down on Sodium

*Sandra Bastin, Dietetics and Human Nutrition; revised by Heather L. Norman-Burgdolf, Dietetics and Human Nutrition*



Sodium 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.

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.

Too much sodium in foods pulls excess water into the bloodstream and increases blood pressure. With high blood pressure, it is recommended to reduce the amount of sodium in foods. This can be done by using the salt shaker less, reducing restaurant and packaged foods eaten, and reaching for salt-free seasoning to flavor foods.

## 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 2,300 milligrams of sodium, or about one teaspoon, of salt per day. For those with high blood pressure, that limit should be 1,500 milligrams or less per day.

## 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.
- 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.
- Use spices and herbs for added flavor.
- Rinse canned beans and vegetables and cook in tap water.

## 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 to be served without added salt, or request that it be prepared without added salt.

- Balance low- and high-sodium choices.
- Watch out for the top-six common foods that add the most salt to your diet, according to the American Heart Association. These are bread and rolls, pizza, sandwiches, cold cuts and cured meats, soup, and burritos and tacos.
- Beware of fast food; it is often very high in sodium.

## Where Is the Sodium?

### Processed Foods

Between one quarter and one 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.

### 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.” Low-sodium foods have 140 milligrams or less of sodium per serving.

- The processing of canned or frozen foods can add sodium. Reach for no-salt-added or low-sodium options when you can. Remember to rinse all varieties!
- 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 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/pmc/articles/PMC3884094/>
- Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (2015). The Facts on Sodium and High Blood Pressure. <https://www.eatright.org/health/health-conditions/cardiovascular-health-heart-disease-hypertension/the-facts-on-sodium-and-high-blood-pressure>
- American Heart Association (2017). Sodium and Salt. <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/sodium/sodium-and-salt>

## Cooperative Extension Service

Agriculture and Natural Resources  
Family and Consumer Sciences  
4-H Youth Development  
Community and Economic Development

## MARTIN-GATTON COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND ENVIRONMENT

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, physical or mental disability or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity. Reasonable accommodation of disability may be available with prior notice. Program information may be made available in languages other than English. University of Kentucky, Kentucky State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Kentucky Counties, Cooperating. Lexington, KY 40506 Revised 03-2024



Disabilities accommodated with prior notification.