

Salt: Shake It Or Leave It?

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If you've never had high blood pressure should you be concerned with the amount of salt in your diet?

The research seems to suggest so. While only ten to fifteen percent of the population is actually salt sensitive, there is no way to find out who those lucky people are. And while high blood pressure tends to be more prevalent among certain ethnic groups than others (African Americans, for example, have a higher risk than Asians), people of every age, race and background would be well advised to limit their salt intake.

Sodium plays a role in the body's fluid balance and blood pressure regulation; the more salt we eat, the more water that can be drawn into the blood stream. Over time this can lead to high blood pressure, kidney disease and stroke.

For this reason the American Heart Association suggests that all Americans limit their love affair with sodium to no more than 2,400 milligrams per day; that's about 1 teaspoon worth of table salt.

Sound stingy? It probably does, as most of us gobble up anywhere from 5 to 10 times that amount in a single day. Indeed, our penchant for processed foods, fast foods and salty snacks has dramatically increased the amount of sodium the typical American diet.

Only about 10 percent of sodium in our diet comes from Mother Nature's foods. The real culprit of too much salt in the diet is processed foods; roughly 75 percent of the salt we eat comes from processed foods such as soups, luncheon meats and frozen dinners. One cup of Rice a Roni pilaf, for example, gobbles up 2440 milligrams of sodium- your daily salt budget in one side dish. Would you like a cup of Cambell's Old Fashioned Chunky Chicken, weighing in at 1067 milligrams of sodium, with that?

Even if you're a bit heavy handed when it comes to salt, for most people salt added at the table accounts for only about 15 percent of their total intake. While this doesn't mean you should go hog wild with the shaker, it does mean that limiting the amount of processed foods in the diet (or looking for low sodium substitutes) may be a more effective strategy.

Salt is an acquired taste, which means that we develop a tolerance for it and require increasing amounts in order to taste it. If you are going to try and shake your love of salt, plan on giving yourself a few weeks until your taste buds adjust-but trust me, adjust they will.



As a general rule of thumb, the fewer processed foods in your diet, the less salt you are getting. When you head to the supermarket, try to shop the perimeter and steer clear of the inner aisles- that is where high salt and highly processed foods are usually stationed. Some other things to keep in mind include the following:

- Limit or avoid include processed meats, such as bacon, bologna, ham, sausage, luncheon meats, and canned fish or poultry. Choose low sodium options if possible, and be sure to read the label so you know what you're getting.
- Choose low sodium soups (whether in a can or a box) and bouillon cubes; focus on other flavorings such as herbs, spices, flavored vinegars and flavoring extracts for taste without the salt.
- Avoid snack foods with visible salt-including chips, crackers, salted nuts; choose their low sodium or unsalted counterparts.
- Limit condiments such as soy sauce (900 milligrams of sodium per tablespoon), barbeque sauce, worcestershire sauce, relishes and ketchup.
- Rinse all canned vegetables to reduce sodium; choose frozen veggies (that do not come in a sauce) over canned to cut the sodium.
- Limit frozen dinners, or choose low sodium lines like Healthy Choice.
- Focus your diet more on fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins-these foods all come in a naturally low sodium, high flavor package that will help reduce the amount of salt in your diet.