

# TE HEALTH TODAY



## *SHAKE THE SALT!*

A recent study shows that the health benefits of reducing the amount of salt in the average American diet are astounding. On the national level, the estimated number of lives and dollars that would be saved by simply reducing daily intake of salt by one half teaspoon of salt per day is quite impressive. Cutting just 1,200 mg of salt (1/2 teaspoon) from our diet could prevent 92,000 deaths, 66,000 strokes, 99,000 heart attacks and the onset of 120,000 new cases of heart disease every year. Shaking the salt from our diets could also result in annual health care cost savings of 10 to 24 billion dollars.

Excess salt intake may significantly raise the risk of high blood pressure, which in turn raises the risk of dying of heart attack or stroke. In fact, excess salt may increase the risk of death more than smoking, high cholesterol, obesity or any other risk factor. High sodium intake can cause our body to retain added water. This increases the volume of blood circulating through the body, can in turn result in higher blood pressure. High blood pressure can damage small blood vessels in the brain, resulting in damage to the brain and increased risk of dementia and stroke.

Even those with only modestly increased blood pressure are at greater health risk than those who are not. High salt intake and elevated blood pressure are estimated to affect 90 percent of people in their lifetime. People at higher risk for health problems related to salt intake include anyone who is middle-age or older, African Americans, and those who already have high blood pressure.

### **Increased Risks and Dangers of Elevated Salt Intake:**

- Elevated Blood Pressure, also known as Hypertension
- Memory Impairment and Dementia
- Coronary Heart Disease and Heart Attack
- Stroke
- Congestive Heart Failure
- Kidney Disorders
- Disorders of the Retina, a leading cause of Blindness
- Impotence
- Damage to the Heart, Blood Vessels, Brain, and Kidneys
- Stiffer Arteries
- Osteoporosis

Don't wait until you are told that you have high blood pressure to reduce your salt intake. While it is true that salt sensitivity varies from person to person, the overall health benefits of reduced intake are evident. By the time a typical person finds out that their blood pressure is elevated, a fair amount of damage to their kidneys, brain, heart and vascular system has already occurred. It is estimated that 65 percent of Americans with high blood pressure do not have their blood pressure under control. This is due to many factors.

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### **Reasons Why Many People Have Uncontrolled High Blood Pressure:**

- Most often, high blood pressure has no symptoms.
- Because people usually do not feel symptoms, they frequently reduce or discontinue their medications. Within a year of being diagnosed, 50% of patients quit taking their medicine.
- Most people are unaware of their high salt intake.
- 28% of people with high blood pressure have not been diagnosed.
- 26% of people being treated for hypertension are not receiving effective treatment.
- 11% of people with high blood pressure are not being treated.
- Some people do not receive significant benefit from high blood pressure treatments due to their elevated salt intake.

The body needs less than 500 mg per day of sodium to stay healthy, yet the average American consumes more than 3,400 mg each day, a 50% increase since the 1980's. Salt intake of up to 6,000 mg is not uncommon. Inadequate sodium is rarely a problem. Sodium helps the body to maintain normal fluid levels, regulate muscle function, properly transmit nerve impulses, and keep blood at a desirable acidity (pH). People who already have high blood pressure or who fall into a higher risk category are advised to limit salt intake to 1500 mg per day. Younger, healthy people without risk or salt sensitivity, less than 1/3 of the population, may be able to consume up to 2400 mg (1 teaspoon) per day.

These limits apply to people regardless of their size or activity levels. If you tend to consume more calories than an average person due to body size or increased caloric needs due to exercise or a high metabolism, you are still subject to the same sodium limits, making it all the more challenging to stay within acceptable levels of daily salt intake.

We tend to use the terms salt and sodium interchangeably, but there is a difference between the two. Table salt, also known as sodium chloride, is comprised of 40% sodium and 60% chloride by weight. One teaspoon of salt has 2,300 mg of sodium, the upper recommended limit for some people, and well above the recommended 1,500 mg limit (2/3 teaspoon) for people subject to increased high blood pressure risk.

Sodium content per serving listed on labels is based on 2,400 mg of salt intake per day. If your daily limit for sodium is only 1,500 mg, then you need to multiply the reported percent daily value by 1.5. For example, if a label lists that a serving contains 20% of the recommended daily intake (%DV) of sodium, then a serving contains 30% DV based on a 1,500 mg maximum daily sodium intake goal.

Unfortunately, many people mistakenly think that if they reduce the amount of salt used in baking along with ignoring the salt shaker on their table is what is required to lower their salt intake. While these are helpful measures, they are not significant enough by themselves

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to accomplish sufficient salt intake reduction. Salting food at the table and adding salt to home-cooked foods only accounts for 10% of sodium intake. Another 10% is contained naturally in food. The remaining 75 to 80% of the sodium we consume comes from processed, packaged foods and from food eaten at restaurants.

Another downfall in reducing salt intake results from the misinterpretation of food labels. Taking time to carefully read labels can be time consuming, but it is important to make this effort. When evaluating a food's nutrient content, be realistic about your actual consumption and do not be fooled by listed serving sizes which are often unrealistically small. Read those labels carefully, making no assumptions that a food labeled as organic, natural or low-fat has acceptable or reduced salt content.

### **Reasons Why Our Sodium Intake is Difficult to Reduce:**

- 75 to 80% of the sodium we consume is added before we open a package.
- Salt content of prepared foods at restaurants and fast food establishments is typically very high; and people are often unaware of these high salt levels.
- We purchase pre-made foods rather than make them from scratch; such foods include chips, crackers, cereals, breads, soup, pizza, spaghetti sauce, salad dressing and lunch meats.
- Foods high in salt content do not always taste salty. Candy is a great example.
- Salt is used to preserve foods and to enhance flavor. It is also used to block bitterness and make foods taste sweeter.
- Besides salt, we also obtain sodium from other common food ingredients and additives, including baking soda (sodium bicarbonate), disodium phosphate, sodium benzoate, MSG (monosodium glutamate), sodium propionate, sodium sulfite, and sodium nitrate/nitrite (common preservatives).

### **Salty Foods to Avoid or Minimize in Order to Reduce Salt Intake:**

- Deli Meats, Hot Dogs, Smoked Fish and Meat, Bacon, Ham, Sausages
- Salted Snacks
- Cheese, including Cottage Cheese
- Commercial Sauces, Salad Dressings and Condiments
- Pickled Foods, Olives
- Processed, Packaged Foods, especially those containing high Sodium or MSG

It is possible to reduce salt content in foods without sacrificing taste or quality. Many food companies have lowered their salt content or now offer reduced-salt options. True, we tend to enjoy high-salt foods, but our taste buds are very capable of adapting to low-salt foods. By reducing your learned salt-intake habits, you will begin to notice flavors previously masked by the unnecessary salt. Foods naturally low in salt but rich in flavor, such as fruits and vegetables, will typically taste better than reduced-sodium processed foods. A recent survey showed that three out of four people on sodium-restricted diets reported that they did not miss the eliminated salt.

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### **Other Measures to Take to Help Lower Salt Intake:**

- Cook from scratch; make your own salad dressings, condiments and sauces.
- Season your own rice, couscous and pasta. Skip the packages.
- Use sodium-free, no-salt-added, and low-sodium canned beans, soups, broth and vegetables.
- Skip the salt shaker.
- Use salt-free seasonings and spices, such as pepper, garlic, parsley, rosemary, tarragon, thyme, celery seed, cumin, dill, curry, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, oregano, basil, lemon or lime juice, and vinegar.
- When eating at restaurants, order sauces and dressings on the side, using only what you need or cannot do without.
- Eat natural foods, such as fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Carefully read and compare labels for sodium content.
- Rinse canned foods, such as tuna, beans and other vegetables.
- Prepare dried beans instead of using canned beans.
- Reduce portion sizes in general, and reduce salty snack consumption.

To summarize these guidelines, eat according to a very simple rule: Get back to nature. Eat fresh, organic fruits, vegetables, nuts, beans and whole grains. Consciously select and prepare foods that are minimally processed. Here's a great example: Potatoes au Gratin from a packaged mix contain about 1,000 mg of sodium per cup, a serving of fast food French fries provides 200 to 500 mg, yet a medium baked potato has only about 20 mg of sodium. The best option is not complicated or difficult; it is obvious.

### **Additional Sources of Salt to be Aware of:**

- Alka-Seltzer has 1100 mg of sodium from sodium bicarbonate.
- Club Soda contains about 50 mg of sodium per cup.
- Mineral Water can contain up to 300 mg per cup.
- Water Softeners add sodium, with the amount varying depending on the hardness of the water. As an alternative, consider a potassium-based softening system.
- Raw chicken and turkey are often injected with salt water to make them appear more plump and to make them juicier. Washing the meat is ineffective in reducing this added salt. Check the label when you purchase poultry.

### **Is Sea Salt Preferable?**

Sea salt and table salt are very similar and have the same basic nutritional value. They both consist mostly of sodium and chloride, but they differ in taste, texture and processing. Research shows that most people prefer the taste of Sea Salt, with Maldon Sea Salt being a favorite of gourmet chefs. Sea salt is produced through the evaporation of salt water. This requires minimal processing and generally allows trace minerals and elements to remain. Table salt, on the other hand, is more heavily processed and usually contains an additive to prevent clumping. Iodine is often added to table salt. Sea Salt contains natural minerals, including calcium and magnesium, which may actually help to lower blood pressure.