





SHAKING OUT THE TRUTH ON SALT

Salty foods are hard to resist, and a steady diet of them can raise your risk of high blood pressure. But do we all need to go low-sodium? Here is the latest thinking and simple how-to advice for enjoying the mineral in moderation.

BY LISA LOMBARDI

Always craving something salty? A heaping plate of french fries, maybe, or a saucy bowl of Asian takeout? You're not the only one: Americans eat more than 3,000 mg of sodium a day—that's beyond the U.S. government's recommendation of 2,300 mg.

First, know that a few fries here and there never hurt anyone. But a whole heaping plate of them meal after meal may increase your chances of developing cardiovascular disease. "It's important to watch your sodium intake because high sodium increases blood pressure and high blood pressure increases your risk for heart attack, stroke, dementia, and kidney and eye disease," says Nieca Goldberg, M.D., medical director of the Joan H. Tisch Center for Women's Health at the NYU Langone Medical Center in New York

City. In fact, according to the American Heart Association, if Americans cut their salt consumption to 1,500 mg of sodium a day, deaths from cardiovascular disease would decrease by 500,000 to nearly 1.2 million (or about 8% to 20%) over the next decade. It's an important public-health goal given that nearly 50% of American adults have cardiovascular disease, according to the AHA.

At the same time, the relationship between salt and our health is complex. Some of us are genetically prone to being salt-sensitive, while other people may not need to go low-sodium. There's also some confusion about the current guidelines and how to best get to those levels.

The Fault with Salt

While salt gets a bad rap, it is actually an essential mineral. Your body needs it to handle basic

functions, such as conducting nerve impulses and balancing water and minerals.

However, get too much salt and it can start to tax your system. “Water is attracted to sodium like a magnet, so an excess of sodium means more fluid is retained in the body,” explains Cynthia Sass, R.D., a performance nutritionist based in Los Angeles. And water retention can do more than leave you feeling bloated. “It puts stress on and reduces the flexibility of our blood vessels, leading to high blood pressure,” explains Goldberg. And that can harm your heart, brain, arteries and kidneys.

So how much salt is too much? This is where things start to get murky. There is conflicting research, as well as differing guidelines from major health organizations. The Department of Health and Human Services’ Dietary Guidelines for Americans

recommends 2,300 mg or less a day for healthy adults (keep in mind that 1 teaspoon of table salt packs 2,325 mg of sodium). The AHA, meanwhile, recommends an ideal goal of 1,500 mg for adults, while noting that healthy people who are at 2,300 mg or less might not need to reduce their sodium beyond that level.

The AHA’s stringent guidelines are based on multiple studies showing both that a high-sodium diet is linked to high blood pressure and that reducing sodium intake helps reduce blood pressure. A 2017 study in *Hypertension* assigned adults to either a regular American diet or the DASH diet, which emphasizes low animal fat, plenty of fruits and vegetables and low sodium. In one week, the people in the DASH group saw their systolic blood pressure drop four points and their diastolic pressure go down one point. A 2017 study published in *Circulation* measured sodium levels in urine and found a strong direct relationship between high sodium and high blood pressure in both men and women.

But some studies have reached opposite conclusions. A 2014 study conducted in France found no link between salt in the diet and systolic blood pressure in men and women. A different study

suggested that reducing sodium can sometimes raise blood pressure: the 2017 study, published in the *FASEB Journal* (published by the Federation of American Societies in Experimental Biology), used data from the long-term Framingham Offspring Study, following people for 16 years. The researchers found that the participants who had gotten below 2,300 mg of daily sodium had higher blood pressure than those who had consumed more.

“Most people don’t understand that when it comes to salt, there is no one-size-fits-all, since people vary in their response to salt,” says Osama Hamdy, M.D., an associate professor at Harvard Medical School and medical director of the Obesity Clinical Program at Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston. “Fifteen percent of people get high blood pressure on a low-salt diet.”

About 25% of the U.S. population are salt-sensitive, Hamdy continues, which makes them at risk of hypertension and stroke, while others are not at the same high risk. Researchers have identified a genetic marker associated with salt sensitivity, he explains, and certain groups, such as African Americans, are more likely to have it.

Experts agree that a few groups need to be especially vigilant about how much sodium they get. “Women, older people, African Americans and people with diabetes, kidney disease or heart failure get the most benefit from a low-sodium diet,” Goldberg says. In fact, new research indicates that it’s important that people with diabetes limit their salt intake, Hamdy adds. “There is a small randomized control trial from the U.K. that showed that a modest reduction in salt intake, to approximately the amount recommended in public-health guidelines, leads to significant drops in BP in individuals with type 2 diabetes and prediabetes with normal or mildly raised BP.”

The Surprising Culprits

Overall, though, most of us could stand to ease up on salt a little. You might think that the best way to cut down is to hide the saltshaker. But that’s not the real problem and solution, says Sass. “More than 70% of the sodium Americans consume is from processed foods,” she says. If you salt your food and sprinkle on $\frac{1}{16}$ teaspoon, that’s only 145 mg of sodium, while

“Most people don’t understand that when it comes to salt, there is no one-size-fits-all, since people vary in their response to salt.”

1 serving of canned soup can pack nearly 700 mg. “Eating fresh food and salting it a little bit after cooking is actually one of the best ways to rein in your sodium intake,” she says. This is a great strategy for reducing sodium consumption, Sass adds, because many of us are in the habit of automatically salting food during cooking. “But if you wait and taste the food first, you may find that you need much less salt than you typically use, especially if you’re ramping up your use of herbs and spices.”

Sprinkle on a dash of whatever type you like: kosher salt, sea salt and table salt—a combination of the minerals sodium and chloride. “Kosher salt contains slightly less sodium per teaspoon than other types because of the larger granules and spaces in between, but all ground salts contain roughly the same sodium content,” Sass says. Sea salt also contains less sodium, and it’s a less-processed alternative.

Beyond packaged foods, another big culprit is our takeout addiction. “Restaurant and takeout meals are notorious sodium bombs,” Sass says. And we greatly underestimate how much sodium we’re getting from our restaurant meals, according to a study published in the journal *Appetite*. In the study, researchers asked people coming out of fast-food restaurants how much sodium they thought they had consumed. The fast-food patrons were getting six times as much as they thought.

If you eat out a lot, you can cut sodium simply by cutting your portions: box up half to go and, bonus, you won’t feel bloated from salt in the morning. Another trick is to ask for sauces on the side and use half or less, says Sass. Or make your own. Sass likes to order a steamed Chinese dish and whip up her own simple sauce: thin almond butter with a little low-sodium veggie broth and whisk with grated fresh ginger, minced garlic and crushed red pepper.

Another good rule of thumb with takeout: the less-processed the better. “Opt for a bowl with lots of veggies, beans and guac over a burrito or quesadilla made with a processed tortilla,” Sass advises.

Read Those Labels

When grocery shopping, the AHA recommends you avoid “the salty six”—a half-dozen categories of foods that pack a ton of sodium. These offenders: pizza, soup, cold cuts and cured meats,

sandwiches, poultry, and breads and rolls.

Breads and rolls? Yes, really. “We don’t generally think of bread as salty, but just one slice of bread can contain up to 230 mg of sodium,” Sass says. “Two slices plus deli meat and cheese, and you can easily rack up over 1,000 mg in one meal.” Other less-expected sources include salad dressings, condiments, frozen meals, pizza, mixes, sauces, sweet treats, such as instant pudding, and even cereal.

By law, companies have to list sodium. A food with less than 140 mg is considered low sodium, according to the AHA. Be sure to check the serving size, too, because small snack-size portions sometimes contain multiple servings, meaning you might be getting more sodium than you think.

While it’s hard to completely eliminate processed foods, we’d all be wise to eat as much whole, unprocessed or minimally processed food as possible, Sass says. Not only does this help us have a more moderate amount of sodium, but it also ensures we get a healthy mix of nutrients. “Swapping processed foods for whole, fresh foods requires no math,” she points out. For example, a breakfast of veggies lightly sautéed in extra-virgin olive oil with an egg and a side of fresh fruit offers much more nutritional value and far less sodium than a breakfast sandwich.

But let’s face it: no matter how careful you are, there are bound to be days when you overdo it and can almost feel the salt oozing out of your pores. No need to beat yourself up—there are three moves that will get you back on track. “Get back to whole, unprocessed foods; eat potassium-rich foods; and drink plenty of water,” Sass advises. Drinking more water will help your kidneys flush out excess sodium and fluid. Potassium, meanwhile, counters the effects of sodium on the body and helps your kidneys sweep away excess sodium and fluid. Potassium-rich picks include oven-roasted skin-on potatoes and sweet potatoes, bananas, spinach and avocados.

Yes, you read that correctly: You’re being prescribed a bowl of fresh guac. Just mind the salted chips. ●

“Opt for a bowl with lots of veggies, beans and guac over a burrito or quesadilla made with a processed tortilla.”