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Salt 101: What you need to know

Sodium chloride. Better known as salt, it's a chemical compound found naturally occurring in seawater, is mined around the world, comes in colors ranging from white to pink to black, and human beings can't live without it. Sodium and chloride are electrolytes, or minerals that conduct electricity through the blood, helping to regulate the balance of fluids in the body and stimulate activity in the brain, nervous system, and muscles. When you have too much or too little of these electrolytes, it can wreak havoc on your system, causing high blood pressure, kidney disease, and heart failure.

In June, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released findings that 9 out of 10 Americans consume too much salt every day — that is, more than the 1 teaspoon daily recommendation. The 4000 people in the study took in, on average, about one and a half teaspoons of sodium daily, while those in the high risk group for high blood pressure were eating double the recommended amount. In a country where one in three adults already have high blood pressure, and where 9 out of 10 are expected to develop it in their lifetime, salt consumption is a serious problem. However, as many as 100,000 heart attacks could be prevented each year if Americans simply reduced their sodium intake by a half-teaspoon daily.

Where's the sodium?

Only 10 - 20% of the salt that most people eat each day actually comes from the salt shaker on the kitchen counter. Sodium occurs naturally in most foods, including meats, nuts, grains, fruits and vegetables, and dairy, but high levels of sodium can be found in processed and packaged foods, whether it's a frozen pizza, a turkey burger, or a slice of fat-reduced pound cake. Processed foods often use sodium as a preservative and it can be found in chemical compounds such as sodium nitrate, monosodium glutamate, and sodium benzoate saccharin. Americans can unwittingly take in as much as five times the recommended amount of salt each day simply by having spaghetti with garlic bread and a Caesar salad for dinner.

How much is enough?

You literally cannot live without salt, so don't think "salt-free". Current recommendations are 6 grams per day — about one teaspoon of salt, or 2300 milligrams of sodium. People with hypertension may be advised by their health care providers to go even lower, perhaps 3 to 4 grams of salt daily.

What can I eat?

Certain foods can really pack a sodium punch, even if they are otherwise healthy (i.e.

high fiber, low fat). For instance, at a summer barbecue you might have vegetarian baked beans, a chicken hot dog, corn on the cob, a slice of blueberry pie, and a diet soda. Total sodium: 1931 milligrams, or nearly your entire sodium intake recommendation for the day — all in one meal. The biggest offender? Those baked beans, which clocked in at over 1000 milligrams of sodium in just one cup, followed closely by the chicken hot dog with 617 milligrams.

Don't despair. At the same barbecue, you could completely change that sodium number by making a few small adjustments. By substituting the beans and hot dog with a grilled chicken breast and a chilled lentil salad, you can reduce that total sodium number to about 375.

Do I really have to read labels?

Yes. It's simple once you know how. Here's a basic rule of thumb: if the sodium content is more than 1.5 grams of salt or 0.6 grams of sodium per 100 grams, then it's a **high sodium food**. If it's 0.3 grams of salt (0.1 grams sodium) or less, then it's a **low sodium food**. You need to figure out how much of a portion you are going to eat and calculate accordingly: if there is 1 gram of salt in a piece of bread, and you're making a sandwich, then the total is 2 grams of salt. If the label shows sodium content, then multiply that number by 2.5.

The National Salt Reduction Initiative:

Over 40 cities, states, health organizations, and corporations have recently joined the National Salt Reduction Initiative, including California, New York, Tennessee, Massachusetts, the District of Columbia, the American Medical Association, the National Association of Black Cardiologists, Kraft Foods, Heinz, Starbucks, and Subway. The goal is to reduce overall population salt intake by 20% over the next five years, with a major focus on providing leadership through health associations and government agencies and working with major food corporations on sodium reduction in prepared foods, stating "The private sector can reduce the amount of salt in processed and restaurant foods – the main sources of salt in our diet – by reformulating its products." This idea has already taken hold in the United Kingdom, where a major effort in salt reduction has been taken on by the commercial bread industry, lowering sodium in bread products by as much as 40% in the past five years. Proponents of the salt reduction effort say that its' success has everything to do with gradually reducing the amounts by 10 - 15% each year, thereby allowing consumers' taste buds to adjust over time to the lower levels of salt.

Create your own salt reduction initiative by checking out these resources:

How Salt Works

<http://recipes.howstuffworks.com/salt.htm>

Even Small Dietary Reductions In Salt Could Mean Fewer Heart Attacks, Strokes and Deaths

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/01/100121092008.htm>

Sodium Content of Your Food

<http://www.umext.maine.edu/onlinepubs/PDFpubs/4059.pdf>

Five Surprising Salt Sources in Food

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2010/06/25/128103187/5-surprising-salt-sources-in-food>

Most Americans Should Consume Less Sodium

<http://www.cdc.gov/features/sodium/>

Cutting Sodium While Grocery Shopping

<http://www.newsnet5.com/dpp/lifestyle/wellness/how-to-cut-down-on-sodium-when-grocery-shopping>