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# SODIUM: FRIEND OR FOE?

Salt is everywhere. It's not just in your saltshaker. In today's society, the majority of processed foods and many restaurant offerings (particularly fast-food) are laden with sodium. As a result, most people are getting far more sodium than they realize – or than is recommended. How important is sodium? Who really needs to watch their sodium intake?

## SODIUM IS ESSENTIAL

Our bodies do require a small amount of sodium. This helps maintain fluid balance, regulate muscle contraction, as well as nerve and brain function. When the levels are low, normally functioning kidneys hold on to sodium and keep it in the bloodstream. When the levels are high, the kidneys dump more sodium in the urine.

But in many situations, the kidneys are unable to get rid of enough sodium. Since sodium attracts and holds onto water, the blood volume expands. With increased blood volume, the heart has to push harder to move the blood around through the blood vessels, which increases the pressure in the arteries – i.e. causing hypertension.

Patients with congestive heart failure, chronic kidney disease, diabetes, and cirrhosis often have difficulty keeping sodium levels regulated. Other people are just particularly salt sensitive – they retain sodium more easily than others, and in some cases just one salty meal can lead to higher blood pressure and even some swelling of the legs. Over the long run, this can lead to heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, and congestive heart failure.

## WHERE AM I GETTING IT?

Current dietary guidelines suggest limiting sodium to less than 2300mg per day – or, less than 1500mg per day for patients over 50, African-Americans, and people with high blood pressure, diabetes, or kidney disease.

In contrast, Americans typically consume 3400mg of sodium per day. Main sources of sodium include:

- Processed and prepared foods. This may constitute up to ¾ of daily salt intake for

many people. Bread, prepared dinners such as pasta, meat and egg dishes, pizza, cold cuts, bacon, cheese, soups, frozen or fast foods.

- Natural sources. Milk, meat, shellfish. One cup of low-fat milk has 107mg of sodium.
- At the table. Consider that one teaspoon of salt has 2325mg of sodium. And just one tablespoon of soy sauce has about 1,000mg of sodium!

## PACKAGED FOODS: KNOW YOUR LABELS

The Nutrition Facts food label lists the amount of sodium in each serving of food. As a rule, try to avoid products with more than 200mg sodium per serving.

Many packaged foods have sodium-related terms. Here is a guide:

- Sodium-free or salt-free: Each serving has less than 5mg of sodium.
- Very low sodium: Each serving has 35mg of sodium or less.
- Low sodium: Each serving has 140mg of sodium or less.
- Reduced sodium. At least 25 percent less sodium than the regular version. Be sure to check how salty the regular version was!
- Light in sodium: Has at least 50 percent less sodium than the original version.
- Unsalted or no salt added: No salt is added during processing of a food that normally contains salt. However, the ingredients themselves may still be high in sodium.

## WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

Eat more fresh foods. Most fresh [not canned] fruits and vegetables are naturally low in sodium. For example, one cup of canned spinach has about 720mg of sodium, while fresh spinach has virtually no sodium. Also, fresh meat is lower in sodium than any processed or prepared meat -- 3 ounces of processed turkey meat has about 900mg of sodium, while 3 ounces of cooked turkey breast has about 45mg. Eat plain whole-grain rice and pasta instead of ones that come with added seasonings. Make your own soups

instead of opening a can.

Remove salt from recipes whenever possible. You can leave salt out of most recipes and they will still be delicious. Baked goods are an exception, since leaving out the salt can affect the quality and taste. Use cookbooks that emphasize low sodium and lowering blood pressure and heart disease.

Use herbs, spices, and other methods to enhance your food. Fresh or dried herbs, lemon, spices can all be used. And remember sea salt is still salt -- it has just as much sodium as regular table salt.

Salt substitutes. Some brands have less sodium than table salt, but many people simply put more on their food to achieve the familiar salty taste. Others contain potassium chloride instead of sodium chloride, but excess potassium ingestion can be harmful to certain people with kidney disease, congestive heart failure, or taking certain blood pressure medications that cause potassium retention.

## DO I REALLY HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT SALT?

Though salt restriction is very important for some people, it is not a major issue for many folks. If you are African-American or have diabetes, high blood pressure, heart, or kidney disease, limiting your salt intake is particularly important. On the other hand, if you are under 50, with normal blood pressure, and otherwise good health, you probably have little reason to worry about salt intake. In fact, avid athletes will lose sodium in sweat, and need to make sure to replete it by eating salted foods or drinking a sodium-containing sport drink.

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