

# Managing Your Salt Intake

The overconsumption of sodium is becoming a major public health issue in the US. A high salt intake is linked to several chronic diseases, including high blood pressure, stroke, and various heart problems.

## The Importance of Sodium

Sodium has several important nutritional benefits. Salt, the most common form of sodium in our diet, is used as a preservative

to inhibit disease-causing organisms in many kinds of food. It also acts as common seasoning to enhance flavor and bind ingredients. Most importantly, sodium helps regulate the blood volume and fluid balance of the body, and even helps the nervous system to function. However, very little sodium is needed for your body, and too much of it can be problematic.

## Health Effects of Too Much Salt

The most common health problems caused by overconsumption of salt are high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. Some studies have linked excess salt in the body to stomach cancer, stroke, heart attack, and kidney disease. People who already have these conditions, as well as diabetics, are at higher risk of worsening their existing health problems.

## Where's the salt?

Most natural foods, including those that don't taste salty, contain some amount of sodium. However, 75% of the sodium consumed by Americans is directly added by food producers and restaurants. While some of this is



added to prevent disease, the amount is well above what is required for your health. In fact, around 77% of salt in your diet comes from processed, packaged, store-bought, and restaurant foods.

## How Much is Too Much?

On average, Americans consume 3,436 mg sodium daily. Health experts recommend not exceeding more than 2,300 mg of sodium per day. Furthermore, if you are African American, aged 40 or older, or have high blood pressure, you should consume no more than 1,500 mg per day.

Keep in mind that just one teaspoon of common table salt equals 2,300 mg of sodium, while one teaspoon of baking soda is equivalent to 1,000 mg of sodium. Even foods advertised as "sodium free" or "low-sodium" can still have some amount present, so always read the label to keep track of your intake.

## Limiting Your Salt Intake

The best way to limit your salt intake is to cut back on dining out and focus

more on eating fresh and homemade food, rather than the packaged or pre-prepared kind. Limit salty snacks like chips, select only items that have low or reduced sodium, and learn to use other spices and herbs in place of salt. When eating out, ask for your dish to be prepared

without salt, and be careful about adding too much salt. Most importantly, always check the label of any product, whether salt-free or not, to keep track of your salt intake. For more information, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/features/sodium/>

## HIGHLIGHTS

When you buy prepared and packaged foods, read the labels. You can tell the sodium content by looking at the Nutrition Facts Label that is standard in every food item. Listed is the amount of sodium, in milligrams (mg), and the "% Daily Value," which is how much of the recommended daily amount of sodium is present in the serving.

Also read the ingredient list to watch for the words "soda" (referring to sodium bicarbonate, or baking soda), "sodium" and the symbol "Na" to see if the product contains sodium. It's always best to cut back on dining out and focus more on eating fresh and homemade food, rather than the packaged or pre-prepared kind.

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