

Reduce Sodium Intake and Help Manage Your Blood Pressure

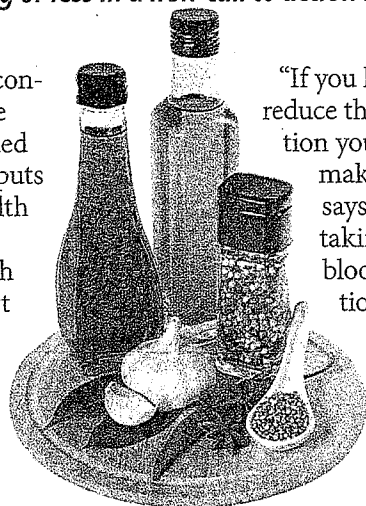
The American Heart Association recommends limiting daily sodium consumption to 1,500 mg or less in a new call to action for 2011.

Most Americans consume well above the recommended levels of sodium, which puts their cardiovascular health in jeopardy. To help address this public health risk, the American Heart Association (AHA) issued a strong advisory earlier this year, urging everyone to limit sodium intake to no more than 1,500 mg per day. Some heart patients may be advised by their doctors to have a lower sodium target.

The average sodium consumption by Americans is more than twice the 1,500 mg recommendation, the AHA noted in the "call to action" advisory published in the Jan. 13, 2011 online issue of *Circulation: Journal of the American Heart Association*.

The AHA is working with the packaged food and restaurant industries to lower the sodium in their products, because an estimated 77 percent of the average person's sodium consumption comes from packaged, processed and restaurant food. Even if you're able to decrease your intake by 400 mg per day, you could see noticeable benefits, the AHA report stated.

Cleveland Clinic dietitian Andrea Dunn, RD, CDE, LD, says heart patients in particular should take note of this recommendation and think of sodium reduction as a key lifestyle change along the lines of exercise, weight loss and smoking cessation. Just decreasing sodium intake can lower systolic blood pressure (the top number on your blood pressure reading) by two mm Hg in people without hypertension and by five mm Hg in patients with hypertension.



Vinegar, garlic and spices are healthier alternatives to seasoning with salt.

"If you knew you could reduce the amount of medication you take, would you make the change?" Dunn says "I often find people taking a combination blood pressure medication, such as one containing hydrochlorothiazide (HCTZ), and including high amounts of sodium foods in their meals and snacks. Isn't this counterproductive? I think most

Americans are very unaware that the six-inch sub they bought has 1,000 milligrams of sodium or that the soup from the restaurant they like to go to has 1,500 milligrams. Awareness is a key issue."

In addition to sodium's impact on blood pressure, excess sodium can also adversely affect the heart, kidneys and blood vessels.

Careful restaurant dining

Cutting back on sodium doesn't mean you must make a major change in where you go out to eat. Dunn suggests doing a little homework before you eat out and making smart choices once you're at the restaurant.

"If you go to a chain restaurant to eat, check out their website," she suggests. "Chances are they post the nutritional information of their menu items. Make informed choices." She adds that when you do dine out, choose foods without sauces or gravies, and hold the cheese toppings. Ask that salt or salt seasonings not be sprinkled on your order, and order salad dressing on the side so you can control how much you use. Better yet, opt for oil and vinegar instead of a creamy salad dressing.

Read labels closely

Foods that you wouldn't think are high in sodium, because they don't taste salty, may surprise you. Packaged desserts and condiments can be packed with sodium. A cup of packaged chocolate pudding can have more than 400 mg of sodium, for example.

Dunn also urges you to read meat labels. "Some chickens are pre-injected with a 15 percent sodium solution," she says. "A new label law goes into effect January 2012 and will require nutrition information on the raw meat label, including sodium. Until then, choose raw meats without additives."

And look out for red flag words indicating high sodium amounts. They include "cured," "pickled," "smoked," "seasoned," and "in broth." And when reading labels, note that the sodium and other nutritional content is listed "per serving" so be aware of how your sodium intake can rise if you have more than one serving of a particular item.

Cook wisely at home

The easiest way to cut back on sodium at home is to cook with more fresh ingredients and less processed food. "You can't remove all the sodium from foods, but rinsing canned beans before cooking with them, for example, can remove 40 percent of the sodium."

If the thought of a reduced-sodium diet conjures up bland meals, explore the use of other seasonings and strong-flavored items you can use to make your meals more interesting. Seasonings and herbs such as garlic and basil can help greatly, and dishes that take lemon or vinegar can make you forget you're bypassing the salt.

