

Sodium in the Diet

When people think of sodium, they generally think of table salt and high blood pressure. It is true that sodium is a part of table salt, but many foods contain sodium besides salt. High blood pressure is associated with high sodium intakes, but not all people who eat a lot of sodium have high blood pressure. So, is sodium necessary? Where is it found and how much should a person consume? These are common questions that will be addressed below.

Where Do We Find Sodium in the Diet?

Sodium is a natural part of most foods and present in certain fruits and vegetables, milk, meats and even most drinking water. Olives contain a high amount of sodium, as do processed cheeses and regular cottage cheese.

Sodium is added to food as table salt, soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce, tartar sauce, onion salt, and garlic salt along with various other food additives in processed foods. Some of the names for sodium-containing additives and preservatives in processed foods include: monosodium glutamate, sodium nitrite, sodium bicarbonate (baking soda), and sodium benzoate. Condiments like mustard, ketchup, relish, sauerkraut and other types of bottled sauces often contain a high amount of sodium.

Canned vegetables and soups generally have high levels of sodium, as do processed meats such as luncheon meats, hot dogs, bacon, sausage, ham, regular canned tuna, canned salmon, and canned crabmeat. Fast foods and snack foods like salted pretzels, and potato chips are often very high in sodium.

Why is Sodium Important?

Because of all the reports in the media about reducing sodium in the diet, many people have come to believe that sodium has no nutritive value and is simply an unnecessary flavoring agent that tastes good. While it is true that the majority of Americans consume more sodium than is necessary for the body, sodium is an essential mineral with important functions in regulating blood pressure, blood volume and balancing body fluids. Sodium also plays a role in the normal functioning of nerves and muscles.

Because sodium attracts water, it operates with potassium in maintaining electrolyte balance by controlling the balance of fluid between the cells and surrounding tissues. Also due to its attraction to water, excess sodium, therefore, can be implicated in edema (excess accumulation of fluid in and around the tissues) or in increased blood pressure by drawing water into the vessels and increasing the intravascular pressure.

Because sodium cannot be made or stored inside the body, it must be consumed in the diet. The body only requires approximately 200 milligrams each day – a

requirement that is easily met without the addition of any table salt or processed foods. Still, more than half of the sodium Americans consume each day comes from sodium compounds used in processed foods for flavoring or as a preservative.

Recommendations for Sodium.

Specific recommendations for sodium intake do not exist, but ranges have been suggested to assure that excessively high sodium consumption is avoided. The average American consumes between 4,000 to 5,000 milligrams of sodium daily – more than is needed. The US Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee and the American Heart Association recommend that Americans should consume no more than 2,400 milligrams of sodium daily. The Nutrition Facts labels on processed foods also suggest an upper limit (Daily Value) of 2,400 milligrams of sodium per day. A single teaspoon of table salt alone contains about 2,000 milligrams of sodium.

Who Should Watch Their Sodium?

Most nutritionists and health care professionals agree that Americans in general can benefit from reducing the amount of sodium in their diets – especially in reducing consumption of high-sodium processed foods that account for the great majority of our salt intake. A diet that is *moderate* in salt and high-sodium foods is recommended.

For people at risk of hypertension, sodium restriction is often necessary. Studies have shown a clear relationship between high sodium intake and increased blood pressure. Such groups at risk for hypertension (blood pressure equal to or greater than 140/90) include: individuals over the age of 50 years, people with a family history of hypertension and African Americans. Some individuals are considered salt-sensitive and their blood pressure is very sensitive to increased levels of sodium in the diet.

Are There Risks to Eating Too Much Sodium?

Too much sodium can lead to a variety of health consequences and potential long-term problems. Excess sodium can upset the fluid balance of the body drawing water and potassium out of the cells where it is needed to maintain electrolyte balance.

The fluid imbalance, as a result of excessive sodium intake, can also lead to edema. Edema is the retention of water in and around the tissues of the body, often the extremities, and typically leads to feelings of bloating and heaviness.

Many studies have shown a clear association between sodium intake and blood pressure. High blood pressure causes increased stress on the heart and is a risk factor for heart disease.

Tips for Reducing Sodium in the Diet.

There are a variety of ways to monitor the amount of sodium in the diet and begin to reduce unnecessary excesses. One can begin by shopping for low-sodium foods and reading labels for sodium content. Fresh, frozen, and no-salt or reduced-sodium canned vegetables are safe options. Experimenting with a variety of spices such as pepper, garlic, celery seeds, oregano, and no-salt blends instead of relying on salt as the only flavoring agent is another option. Other flavoring alternatives to salt include fruit juices, basil, cinnamon, cumin, curry powder, dry mustard, garlic powder, onion powder, thyme and a host of others. Garlic salt, onion salt and meat tenderizer are *high* in sodium, however, each with over 1,500 milligrams of sodium per teaspoon!

Another simple tip includes limiting the use high-sodium condiments and sauces like soy sauce, mustard, relish, and Worcestershire sauce. It is also good advice to rinse canned vegetables thoroughly to decrease the sodium by removing the salty liquid. Replacing processed foods with fresh fruits, vegetables and grains also reduces the amount of sodium consumed.

Nutritionists and chefs agree that foods can be prepared with maximum flavor that are also low in sodium.

Benefits from Reducing Sodium Intake.

Eating less salt and sodium can help reduce blood pressure or keep it within the normal, healthy range, especially in individuals at risk of hypertension and heart disease. Restricting sodium is a safe, effective and simple dietary approach to controlling blood pressure that may even reduce reliance on blood pressure medications.

Reducing the amount of processed, high-sodium foods and replacing them with fresh fruits and vegetables can also offer additional health benefits by providing other nutrients including vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals in addition to reducing sodium content.

While sodium is indeed a necessary mineral in the diet, most Americans could benefit by ensuring *moderate* daily intake from whole food sources.

References:

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