

Sodium

Why We Need It

Sodium is a mineral that the body needs in small amounts. It is found in foods mostly as sodium chloride, which is another name for table salt. One teaspoon of salt contains approximately 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium.

Small amounts of sodium are needed to maintain the right balance of body fluids. It also helps transmit nerve impulses, helps regulate blood pressure, and influences the contraction and relaxation of muscles, including the heart.

Sodium and High Blood Pressure

About one in four Americans has high blood pressure, which increases their risk of having a heart attack, stroke, congestive heart failure, and kidney disease. Many people eat more sodium (salt) than necessary, and cutting back can reduce high blood pressure (hypertension).

It is not known who will develop high blood pressure. A high salt intake can increase the chance of having high blood pressure. Additional risk factors include having other family members with high blood pressure, being overweight and advancing in age.

Amounts Needed

The body needs only a small amount of sodium. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends eating only one teaspoon of salt per day. This is approximately 2,300 mg of sodium. Most Americans consume almost double that amount, or an average of 4,000 mg of sodium a day.

The following groups of people should consume no more than 1,500 mg of sodium per day: African Americans, people over fifty years of age, and

people with chronic diseases (e.g. diabetes, high blood pressure and kidney disease).

Recommended Daily Intakes of Sodium

Age	Sodium (mg/day)
birth to 6 months	120
6 to 12 months	370
1 to 3 years	1,000
4 to 8 years	1,200
9 to 50 years	1,500
51 to 70 years	1,300
over 70 years	1,200
pregnancy	1,500
breastfeeding	1,500
mg = milligrams	
<p>Source: adapted from the Dietary Reference Intakes series, National Academies Press. Copyright 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004, by the National Academies of Sciences.</p>	

Sources

Sodium occurs naturally in many foods and is also added in processing. Many restaurant foods are very high in sodium. Most of the sodium added to foods comes from salt. In fact, about one-third of the sodium in our diets is from salt we use in cooking or add at the table.

Sodium also is found in other ingredients and food additives, so eat these foods **less** often: processed cheeses; salted, smoked, or cured meats; pickled or canned fish; canned soups and meats; pickles, sauerkraut, and relishes; salty snacks and crackers; and condiments (e.g. catsup, mustard, steak sauce, soy sauce, teriyaki sauce, chile sauce, gravies, marinades, and salad dressings). Check their nutrition labels.

Ways to Reduce Sodium

It is important to keep the amount of sodium in your diet at a healthy level. This level is affected by the foods you choose and the ways you prepare and serve them.

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that you choose and prepare foods with little salt. At the same time, you should eat potassium-rich foods, such as fruits and vegetables.

To cut back on sodium, choose low sodium foods more often. If you eat a high sodium food, balance it with low sodium foods. Use the salt shaker less often, and never salt food before tasting it.

Eliminate or reduce these foods in your diet:

- cured or processed meats (e.g. ham, bacon, sausage, frankfurters, luncheon meats)
- canned vegetables or frozen veggies with sauce
- commercially prepared meals (e.g. TV dinners, package mixes), main dishes, or canned or dried soups
- cheese or foods with lots of cheese (e.g. pizza, macaroni and cheese)
- salted nuts, popcorn, pretzels, corn chips, potato chips
- seasoning mixes, salad dressings, or condiments (e.g. soy sauce, steak sauce, catsup, and mustard)

Read the Label

Food labels can help you keep your sodium intake to one teaspoon per day. Most packaged foods must have nutrition and ingredient information on the label. The amount of sodium per serving must be included on the nutrition portion of the label.

Nutrition information is given in a table called **Nutrition Facts**, which gives the amount of sodium in milligrams per serving and as a percent of the Daily Value. This information allows you to compare the amount of sodium in different brands of the same food.

In this Nutrition Facts label, one serving of the food, or ½ cup, contains 300 mg of sodium. This is 13% of the Daily Value for sodium.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size ½ cup (114g)	
Servings Per Container 4	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 90	Calories from Fat 30
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 3g	5%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 300mg	13%
Total Carbohydrate 13g	4%
Dietary Fiber 3g	12%
Sugars 3g	
Protein 3g	
Vitamin A 80%	Vitamin C 60%
Calcium 4%	Iron 4%
* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:	
	Calories: 2,000 2,500
Total Fat	Less than 65g 80g
Sat Fat	Less than 20g 25g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg 300mg
Sodium	Less than 2,400mg 2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate	300g 375g
Dietary Fiber	25g 30g
Calories per gram:	
Fat 9 • Carbohydrate 4 • Protein 4	

Food Label Claims

If a food label says a food is “sodium free” or “low sodium,” what does this mean? The table below shows nutrition claims allowed on food labels.

Nutrient Claims About Sodium on Food Labels

Label	Sodium per Serving
Sodium free	5 mg or less
Very low sodium	35 mg or less
Low sodium	140 mg or less
Reduced or less sodium	Sodium reduced by 25% or more
Light in sodium	50% less sodium than the traditional food*
No salt added, unsalted	No salt added during processing; but product may still contain sodium naturally
*restricted to foods with more than 40 calories per serving or more than 3 grams of fat per serving	

Cooking With Less Sodium

Salt provides flavor and helps preserve food. However, Americans eat much more than is needed. Here are some ways to cut back on sodium:

- Use more fresh foods and less canned foods. Processed foods tend to be higher in sodium than fresh foods.
- Try some packaged foods labeled “low sodium,” “very low sodium,” “reduced sodium,” or “less sodium.”
- Try new low sodium recipes.
- Some recipes don’t really need any salt!
- Gradually cut down on the salt in your favorite recipes. Use less salt every time you make the recipe.
- Reduce salt used in cooking pasta, rice, noodles and hot cereal. Try cutting the salt in half at first. Then see if you can use no salt at all in these foods.
- Use spices and herbs, lemon juice, or lime juice instead of salt. For specific examples, refer to Low-Sodium Seasonings.

Low-Sodium Seasonings: To keep your food tasty, cut down on added salt slowly and cook with herbs and spices. Even if you are a salt lover, you will soon lose the desire for salty foods.

Low-Sodium Seasonings

For These Foods:	Season With:
pot roast or meatloaf	allspice, garlic, marjoram, thyme
fish	chives, dill, tarragon
poultry	marjoram, rosemary, tarragon
soups	curry powder, ginger
pastas	poppy seeds, savory
tomatoes or tomato sauces	basil, oregano
rice or bulgur	basil, curry powder, onion powder
cooked cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, or cauliflower	caraway seeds, curry powder, marjoram
cooked carrots or beets	caraway seeds, cloves
cooked green beans, lima beans or peas	dill, rosemary

Special Herb and Spice Combinations: Start with equal amounts of each herb or spice (except hot pepper!) and adjust to suit your taste.

Barbecue blend: cumin, garlic, hot pepper, oregano

Italian blend: basil, marjoram, oregano, rosemary, sage, savory, thyme

Egg herbs: basil, dill weed (leaves), garlic, parsley, fines herbes (mixture of chopped herbs)

Salad herbs: basil, parsley, tarragon

For More Information

For related information on sodium in your diet, refer to [HGIC 4054, *Halt Salt!*](#) The Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) agent at your county Extension office may have more written information and nutrition classes for you to attend. Also, your doctor, health care provider, or a registered dietitian (RD) can provide reliable information.

Reliable nutrition information may be found on the Internet at the following sites:

<http://hgic.clemson.edu>

<http://virtual.clemson.edu/groups/NIRC/>

<http://www.eatright.org>

<http://www.nutrition.gov>

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic>

Sources:

1. Bobroff, Linda B. University of Florida Extension. *Nutrition for Health and Fitness: Sodium in Your Diet*. FCS8129. October 2002.

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publications.html>

2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005*.

<http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines>

3. National Academies of Sciences. National Academies Press. *Dietary Reference Intakes series*. 2004.

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