



ASK THE DIETITIAN

Salt, Sodium and Your Health

Q. I have a family history of hypertension, how can I reduce my risks for this?

A. Many of the risk factors for hypertension can be controlled and will also help reduce your risk for heart attack and stroke. These include weight, activity, diet, and other lifestyle-related behaviors. If you are overweight, try to lose some pounds through diet and exercise. Just a 5-10% decrease in body weight can help reduce your risk. It is also important to get at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most or all days of the week. Eating a balanced diet that is rich in whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, and low-fat dairy while limiting saturated fat and sodium can further help to reduce your risk. You should also include sources of healthy fats (omega 3's) like salmon, tuna, walnuts and flaxseed. Two major lifestyle factors that increase risk for hypertension are drinking and smoking. If you are a smoker it is important to kick the habit to reduce your risk. You should also limit alcohol to 1-2 drinks or less per day. Talk to your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.

Q. I know I need to cut my sodium intake but foods just don't taste as good without salt, how can I prepare lower-sodium foods that are still flavorful?

A. Using spices and herbs is a great way to cut back on sodium when cooking without sacrificing taste. Experiment with a variety of herbs and spices in your cooking. For example use chili peppers, cilantro, cumin, or garlic for hot or spicy dishes. Use allspice, cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg for sweet dishes. Try oregano, thyme, savory, basil, and rosemary for Italian foods. For just about everything you can add basil, black pepper, bay leaves, and parsley. Be aware of spices such as garlic salt or onion salt because they still contain sodium. To save money you can grow most of these herbs fresh in your kitchen. Some other options include vinegar, lemon juice, hot sauce, and low-sodium broths. Once you get the hang of using these ingredients you won't miss the salt as much.

Q. I never add salt to my foods; could I still be getting too much sodium?

A. Most of the sodium we eat is from packaged and processed foods as well as foods eaten in restaurants. With sodium in almost everything we eat, it is very easy to get more than the recommended 2,300 mg per day. It is great that you don't add salt to your foods but you should also limit your intake of high-sodium packaged or canned foods like soup, canned vegetables, high-sodium condiments, and frozen dinners. Focus on eating mainly fresh, minimally processed foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean meats. Also look for hidden sources of sodium on labels. Compare and contrast items and choose those with less than 20% daily value for sodium. When eating out, order foods without extra sauces and ask for foods to be prepared without salt.

Our dietitians receive hundreds of questions each year about a wide variety of nutrition topics. Their timely and trustworthy insights and ideas can help you and your family live healthier lives. Since everyone's health history and nutritional needs are so different, please make sure that you talk with your own doctor and registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.



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Q. I have high blood pressure and was advised to follow the DASH diet. What is the DASH diet and is it right for me?

A. The DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) has been shown to reduce blood pressure therefore may be a good option for you. The DASH eating plan is rich in grains, fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy while limiting saturated fat, cholesterol, sweets, and red meat. It also focuses on fiber, potassium, calcium, and magnesium which play a part in regulating blood pressure. The DASH eating plan recommends the following number of servings from each of the food groups:

- 7-8 servings of grains
- 4-5 servings of vegetables
- 4-5 servings of fruits
- 2-3 servings of low-fat dairy
- 2 or less servings of meat
- 2-3 servings of fats/oils
- 4-5 servings of unsalted nuts, seeds, legumes per week
- 5 or less servings of sweets per week

A diet that is rich in whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy while limiting saturated fat and sugar can be beneficial for everyone, even those who do not have hypertension. Talk to your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you. For more information visit www.dashdiet.org.

Q. What do sodium labels such as low-sodium, reduced-sodium, and no salt added really mean?

A. Packaged items can have various labels to help identify foods that are lower in sodium. According to the American Heart Association these labels mean the following:

- Sodium-free- less than 5 mg of sodium per serving
- Very-low sodium- 35 mg or less per serving
- Low-sodium- 140 mg or less per serving
- Reduced sodium- usual sodium level is reduced by 25%
- Unsalted or no salt added- made without the salt that's normally used, but still contains the sodium that's a natural part of the food itself.

These are helpful in choosing packaged or prepared foods with lower amounts of sodium however sticking to fresh foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean meats, and low-fat dairy will ensure you are eating a diet naturally lower in sodium.

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Q. If the body just gets rid of extra sodium why is too much bad for your health?

A. The kidneys are responsible for excreting extra sodium in the body, however if you are salt sensitive, or have kidney problems they may not be able to do this efficiently. When there is too much sodium in your body it builds up in the blood, bringing water with it which leads to a rise in blood volume. This means your heart must work even harder by increasing pressure to pump blood through the body. This is how hypertension occurs and can eventually lead to heart attacks and strokes. Limit the amount of sodium in your diet by avoiding lots of packaged, processed, and fast foods and use spices and herbs instead of table salt.

Q. I have recently been advised by my doctor to go on a low-salt diet, what foods should I be eating and which should I be avoiding?

A. Foods that are high in sodium are typically processed, packaged, or canned. Many condiments and dressings are also high in sodium. Read labels and choose foods that have 20% or less of your daily value for sodium. On a low-salt diet you should be eating foods like whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy, and fresh lean meats. The following are some specific foods that you should choose and some to limit:

Choose these:	Limit these:
Low-fat milk/yogurt/natural cheese	Processed cheeses
Low-sodium vegetable juice	Regular vegetable juice
Whole-grain bread and unsalted crackers	Bread and crackers with added salt
Oatmeal	Instant hot cereals
Fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables or low-sodium canned vegetables	Canned vegetables
Fresh or frozen meats	Smoked meats/deli meats/lunch meats
Spaghetti or rice without salt	Packaged rice or instant noodles
Homemade or low-sodium soups	Canned soups
Unsalted nuts/popcorn	Chips, salted nuts
Tabasco sauce	Soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce

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Q. I take my blood pressure medication on a regular basis; do I still have to watch my sodium intake?

A. If you continue to eat too much sodium in your diet it may counteract the desired effects of the medication, especially if you are salt sensitive. If your doctor prescribed blood pressure medication it typically means diet and exercise alone were not enough to control your blood pressure. Adding medication to the mix can help but your medication is most effective if you continue to watch your sodium intake and exercise. Talk to your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.

Q. I heard that some fruits and vegetables contain sodium so why are they recommended on my low-salt diet?

A. Some fruits and vegetables contain sodium but in very small amounts. The main concern is with canned vegetables that have added salt. Look for no added salt or low-sodium on the label when choosing canned foods. Fresh fruits and vegetables are important in any diet because they provide a variety of vitamins and minerals needed for good health. Fruits and vegetables are also a good source of potassium which is especially important for regulating blood pressure. Including a variety of fruits and vegetables and limiting processed or prepared foods can help you lower your sodium intake and allow you to better control your blood pressure.

Q. I am trying to reduce my sodium intake, are salt substitutes or sea salt better options?

A. Salt substitutes are an alternative to table salt and are made up of potassium chloride instead of sodium chloride, therefore are lower in sodium. These substitutes should be used in moderation and may not be safe for everyone, especially people with kidney, heart, or liver problems. Sea salt is similar to table salt in sodium content; the real difference between the two is taste and texture. Therefore sea salt should also be used in moderation. A better alternative would be to use herbs and spices that are naturally low in sodium to add extra taste and flavor to foods.

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