

What's Shaking with Salt?

MOST AMERICANS get too much of a good thing when it comes to sodium. A small amount of this mineral, which is a component of table salt and other food additives, is essential for keeping your body functioning properly. However, a surplus of sodium prompts your kidneys to retain extra water. While younger, healthier people may be able to withstand this burden for a time, eventually the stress of fluid buildup damages the heart, blood vessels, and other organs.

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans published by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) puts the upper limit of healthy sodium consumption at 2,300 mg daily, far below the 3,400 mg that is typical for an average adult. While it's easy to cut down on salt that you add to your food during cooking or at the table, the vast majority comes from packaged, processed, and restaurant foods. So, how do we tackle these sneaky sources of sodium?

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

So how much salt is 2,300 mg, our daily recommended intake? About 1 teaspoon. Be leary of the content of sodium in prepared foods and pay close attention to the "% of Daily Value" column of the Nutrition Facts label. A food that supplies 5 percent or less of your daily sodium is considered a low-sodium choice. You should avoid items with 20 percent or more per serving.

Beware of baked goods. Additives in bread and pastry are notoriously high in sodium. (For example, a teaspoon of baking soda contains 1,250 mg of sodium.) Try wrapping your sandwich in a corn tortilla as a low-sodium alternative to sliced bread.

Don't be fooled by fancy salts. Gourmet salts abound, but sea salt and other fancy varieties still contain 40 percent sodium—the same as processed salt.

Use caution with cottage cheese. Even a healthy food like this can be a sodium sinkhole with over 900 mg of sodium per 1 cup serving. A cup of low-fat yogurt, on the other hand, contains only about 160 mg of sodium.

Control condiments. Seasoning packets, commercial salsa, oyster sauce, and especially miso and soy sauce pack a heavy sodium wallop. Use them sparingly. Shake sensibly. If you do like to add salt to your food, keep your daily consumption to a reasonable limit. It's easy to do this by premeasuring about a one-quarter teaspoon of salt into a small shaker that you carry with you to meals. This will ensure that you do not add more than 600 mg of sodium over the course of a day.

WHO SHOULD LOWER SODIUM TO 1,500 MG?

The Dietary Guidelines recommend that people who are at greater risk for high blood pressure cap their sodium intake at 1,500 mg a day. This group makes up about half the U.S. population and includes those aged 51 and older, and people of any age who are African American or have hypertension, diabetes, or chronic kidney disease. Dietitian Carolynn Auseth admits that a 1,500 mg sodium diet will be a shock at first. But, she adds, Most people adjust to it within a few weeks. To keep within this limit, she advocates choosing naturally low-sodium food such as fruits and vegetables and adding flavor to food with lemon juice, herbs, and no-salt-added spices.

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