

Shake off the Salt

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We eat far more amounts of salt than we need and the long-term effects can be pretty serious. Sodium helps to maintain the right balance of fluids and function of nerve impulses & muscles. Though it is an essential electrolyte in our body, excess amounts of sodium which our kidneys cannot get rid of fast enough can lead to osteoporosis in women (even if calcium intake is normal), water retention and hypertension (the major cause of heart attacks and stroke). Weight loss in overweight individuals, only if accompanied by a low sodium diet, can help reduce hypertension.

The Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) for sodium is 2000mg a day. That is the equivalent to just a teaspoon of table salt! It is a relatively small amount when compared to the amount of sodium found in processed and packaged foods.

Our current food supply is full of hidden and higher sources of sodium, especially preserved foods. The thing about sodium is that it can sneak up in foods when we least expect it. Some foods, although high in salt, may not taste salty. Our taste buds get used to it so that we may not notice how salty the food actually is. For some individuals, sodium in foods consumed frequently can add up over time and show up in our appearance, like puffiness of the face (our face too, is an accurate indicator of our health!), heavy bags under our eyes, and swelling of the body that makes our jeans tight.

Some bread and cereals have hidden sources of sodium. Did you know that a glass of milk (250ml) contains 80 to 120mg of sodium? Chips, bite-size sausages, cold cuts, all common party foods, are loaded with sodium. So is cheese! It is therefore always wise to stick to the right portion size.

So, how can we be vigilant when salt is in everything?

* The first step is to make smart choices with our groceries. Take time to read the label. Reading labels will help us to compare the products. Check the nutritional panel for sodium and choose the product with low sodium. Opt for 400mg or less sodium per serving.

- * The following are a few of the many forms of sodium:
- Mono sodium glutamate (MSG)
 - Di Sodium Inosinate
 - Di Sodium Phosphate
 - Sodium Nitrite
 - Sodium Nitrate
 - Sodium Benzoate
 - Sodium Ascorbate
 - Sodium Citrate
 - Sodium Bi-carbonate (Baking Soda)
 - Baking Powder

The higher the number of sodium in the ingredients list, the higher the amount of sodium the product has!

- * Beware of fat-free and low-fat food products that may be high in sodium.
- * Limit the use of salt while cooking and refrain from using salt shakers on the table.
- * Squeeze fresh lemon juice on steamed vegetables and broiled fish/chicken and brown rice.
- * Garnish cooked vegetables with cooked or baked garlic. Raw onion can be added to liven up meats and vegetables.
- * Use mushroom, sweet corn, scallion (green onion), cilantro (coriander leaves), mint leaves and parsley to garnish soups, salads, cooked rice and pastas.



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WARNING! Sodium sensitivity

Sodium retention is one of the mechanisms influencing the development of hypertension in diabetes patients. Frequent rises in blood pressure are salt sensitive which can be controlled by reducing dietary sodium. In addition to its effect on raising blood pressure, several studies have associated high sodium intake with evidence of target organ damage.

Check out the amount of sodium in the following:

A teaspoon of soya sauce (light)	365mg
Dark soya sauce	200mg
Reduced-salt soya sauce	185mg
Regular serving of french fries	200mg
One medium salted egg	350mg
A plate of mee goreng	1800mg
Char kway teow	1460mg
Chicken rice	1290mg
Nasi briyani with chicken	1660mg

Here are some healthy ways to enhance the flavour of your dishes:

HIGH-SODIUM FOODS	HEALTHY LOW-SODIUM OPTIONS
Frozen meal	Choose frozen meals with less than 400mg of sodium per serving.
Preserved canned vegetables and beans	Limit the consumption of these products. Rinse the canned vegetables and beans before cooking/serving. Rinsing may only help to reduce less than 50% of the salt. Go for fresh or frozen vegetables with no salt added.
Processed or cured meats : ham, bacon, luncheon meat, sardines, anchovies, smoked salmon, sausage, mock meats, etc.	Choose fresh, lean meat, fish and plant-based protein sources.
Condiments like soy sauce, marinades, dressings, teriyaki sauce, pasta sauce, salsa, BBQ sauce, taco sauce, garlic salt, onion salt, etc.	Read labels and use lower versions of sodium. Choose low-sodium varieties. Look for salt-free seasoning. Make your own salad dressing with oil, lime juice, mint leaves and vinegar.
Restaurant meals (sit-down and Fast Food)	Many restaurant meals contain enough sodium required for the whole day! Request for low-salt preparations or share large portions with family members.
Soups and broths	Homemade soup garnished with herbs.

Diets low in sodium reduce the risk of hypertension and stroke. Fruits and vegetables are low in sodium and are good sources of potassium, magnesium, and fibre that help control hypertension. Fruits such as banana, papaya, orange, cantaloupes, prunes, apricots, kiwi, grape fruit, and dried fruits including dates, raisins and vegetables such as broccoli, potatoes, tomatoes, bamboo shoot, greens (swiss chard, spinach, beet, mustard) are good sources of potassium. However, do consult a dietitian if you have a high potassium level.

A change from unhealthy habits to healthy habits will yield extraordinary results. Even a modest reduction in consuming foods with excess salt and fat combined with modest increase in physical activity can make a difference.

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