



Ontario Home Economics Association

Ask a Professional Home Economist

For Immediate Release

Take a Pass on Sodium

by Mairlyn Smith, P.H.Ec.

Sodium is everywhere in today's food chain. If your day consists of grabbing a breakfast bagel, packing a deli sandwich for lunch, heating a frozen entrée for dinner, and then munching on pretzels while you watch TV, then you're well on your way to becoming a human salt lick.

In Canada, sodium or 'salt' intake and its link to hypertension has been recognized as a serious dietary issue. Reducing our consumption of sodium is one of the many steps in the journey towards good health. Roughly 75% of the sodium we get in our diet is from fast food, convenience food, restaurant food, and a variety of packaged foods. The other 25% comes from the salt we shake in during cooking, at the table, and the naturally-occurring sodium found in food.

"It is estimated that almost one in three Canadians who have hypertension would have normal blood pressure if there was less sodium in our food," states Dr. Norm Campbell of Blood Pressure Canada. In response to an ever-growing alarm about the nation's high sodium intake, Minister of Health Tony Clement announced in October 2007 that his Ministry was establishing a Sodium Working Group as a first step towards the development of a long-term national strategy to reduce dietary sodium levels. The National Sodium Policy goal is to reduce Canadian adults' consumption of sodium by January 1, 2020.

Sodium isn't all bad. It helps maintain the right balance of fluids in our body, helps transmit nerve impulses, and influences the contraction and relaxation of muscles. Your kidneys play an important role in this equation. If your kidneys can't eliminate excess sodium, then the sodium starts to accumulate in the blood, increasing blood volume and causing your heart to work harder, which in turn can cause excess pressure in your arteries. Extra sodium in fast food, restaurant food, convenience food and packaged food ups the amounts of sodium you ingest, which in turn ups the ante in developing heart disease.

Not all people react the same way to sodium. Some are much more sensitive to the effects of sodium than others. Excess sodium can increase their chance of developing high blood pressure, a condition that can lead to cardiovascular and kidney disease. If you're over 50, African American, or have a health condition such as high blood pressure, chronic kidney disease or diabetes, you may be more sensitive to the blood pressure-raising effects of sodium.

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According to Statistics Canada, the average Canadian consumes in excess of 3,100 mg of sodium a day. Health Canada has determined that an adequate daily intake for a healthy adult is 1,200 mg to 1,500 mg of sodium. According to the results from the 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey, more than 85% of men and 60% of women are consuming 'way over the recommended limits. Research shows that lowering sodium consumption to optimal levels could reduce the incidence of stroke and heart disease by as much as 30%. Considering that one teaspoon (5 mL) of table salt has 2,325 mg of sodium and one tablespoon (15 mL) of soy sauce has 1,005 mg of sodium, becoming proactive is no easy task.

Tips for reducing sodium in your diet:

- Become an avid label reader. Check the sodium per serving on packaged foods and be prepared to be shocked. Compare brands and equal serving sizes to choose the product with the least sodium.
- Choose the brand labeled *Low Sodium* or *Reduced Sodium* in packaged foods, where possible.
- Avoid deli meats. Most are chock full of sodium. Try to avoid bologna, ham, sausage, hot dogs, bacon, and deli meats. Instead, cook extra chicken, turkey or beef for dinner and use in sandwiches.
- Reduce your intake of smoked, cured, or pickled foods.
- Give your salt shaker the old heave ho.
- Don't add salt while cooking. You can eliminate added salt to most recipes such as soups, stews, salad dressings, casseroles, and in most baking with the exception of bread-making. Try adding herbs and spices or salt substitutes like Mrs. Dash to foods instead.
- Beware of hidden sodium-laden condiments. Relish, commercial salad dressings, curry pastes, sauces, bouillon cubes, salsas and dips all are potentially high in sodium. Choose the lower sodium version.
- Choose lower sodium tomato or vegetable juice, salsa, canned tomatoes, soup or tomato sauce.
- Avoid packaged side dishes. Cook rice, grains, and pasta from scratch.
- Drain and rinse canned beans with water until the water runs clear. You can rinse off up to 40% of the sodium listed on the label.
- It's difficult to find lower sodium frozen entrées. Buy brands that contain less than 500 to 600 mg of sodium per serving. This is still quite high, but it might be all that is currently available.
- Limit or avoid fast food consumption and restaurant eating.
- If your diet is a sea of salt, it may take 8 to 12 weeks to adjust your palate to less salty food.
- Eating less processed foods and consuming more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and non-fat dairy products will help you choose foods that are naturally low in sodium.

If you never 'eat out' and make all of your meals from scratch every single day, you may be within Health Canada's higher limits of 2,300 mg of sodium a day depending on your diet. Aiming for 1,200 to 1,500 mg per day will only be possible with the help of food manufacturers, restaurants, and fast food chains reducing the sodium in their products.

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Mairlyn Smith is a Toronto-based Professional Home Economist, speaker and food writer. Her articles have appeared in *Chatelaine*, *Today's Parent*, *Canadian Living*, *Homemakers*, *alive*, *Health Essentials* and *The Toronto Star*. Her cookbooks include *The Ultimate Healthy Eating Plan that still leaves room for chocolate* and the best-selling nutrition/cookbook *Ultimate Foods for Ultimate Health – and don't forget the chocolate!* (in fourth print), co-authored by Liz Pearson, RD.

The Ontario Home Economics Association, a self-regulated body of Professional Home Economists, promotes high professional standards among its members so that they may assist families and individuals to achieve and maintain a desirable quality of life.

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