

Salt: Friend or Foe?*

When it comes to a healthy diet, everyone has a slightly different approach. Many people focus on cutting high-fat foods. Others feel best when they reduce their intake of simple carbohydrates. Those who want to drop pounds count their calories. There is another aspect of a healthy diet, however, that most of us overlook. It is the amount of salt we consume, and it is critical to good health.

Everyone needs some salt to function. Also known as sodium chloride, salt helps maintain the body's balance of fluids. Salt also functions in many foods as a preservative by helping to prevent spoilage and keeping certain foods safe to eat. But nearly all Americans consume more salt than they need, according to the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. These guidelines are published every five years by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The natural salt in food accounts for about 10 percent of total intake, on average, according to the guidelines. The salt we add at the table or while cooking adds another 5 to 10 percent. About 75 percent of our total salt intake comes from salt added to processed foods by manufacturers and salt that cooks add to foods at restaurants and other food service establishments.

What are the health effects of too much salt?

In many people, salt contributes to high blood pressure. High blood pressure makes the heart work harder and can lead to heart disease, stroke, heart failure, and kidney disease.

What is the daily recommended amount of sodium for adults?

The amount of salt in a food is listed as “sodium” on the Nutrition Facts label that appears on food packaging. The Dietary Guidelines recommend that the general population consume no more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium a day (about a teaspoon of table salt). Most food labels shorten the word “milligrams” to “mg.” Dietary recommendations and food labels use sodium rather than salt since it is the sodium component of salt that is most relevant for human health. Some people are more sensitive to the effects of salt than others. The guidelines also recommend that, in general, individuals with hypertension, blacks, and middle-aged and older adults should limit intake to 1,500 mg of sodium per day.

The exceptions to this guideline are people whose doctors have put them on a diet that requires even less sodium because of a medical condition. Always follow your doctor’s recommendation about how much sodium you can have daily.

What steps can I take to lower my salt intake?

- Eat more fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Consume foods that are rich in potassium. Potassium can help blunt the effects of sodium on blood pressure. The recommended intake of potassium for adolescents and adults is 4,700 mg/day. Potassium-rich foods include leafy, green vegetables and fruits from vines.
- Flavor food with pepper and other herbs and spices instead of salt.
- Choose unsalted snacks.
- Read food labels and choose foods low in sodium.

How can I tell if a food is low in sodium or high in sodium?

The Nutrition Facts label that appears on food packaging also lists the “% Daily Value” for sodium. Look for the abbreviation “%DV” to find it. Foods listed as 5% or less for sodium are low in sodium. Anything above 20% for sodium is considered high. Try to select foods that provide 5% or less for sodium, per serving.

Are salt substitutes safe?

Many salt substitutes contain potassium chloride and can be used by individuals to replace salt in their diet. There are no known undesirable effects in healthy people who consume a lot of potassium; however, potassium could be harmful to people with certain medical conditions, such as diabetes, kidney disease, and heart disease. Check with your doctor before using salt substitutes.

What is FDA's role in regulating salt?

- Salt is regulated by FDA as a “generally recognized as safe” (GRAS) ingredient. A GRAS substance is one that has a long history of safe, common use in foods, or that is determined to be safe, for the intended use, based on proven science. These substances need not be approved by FDA prior to being used.
- FDA requires that sodium content be stated on food labels. FDA has implemented several labeling requirements related to sodium content of foods.
- FDA sets criteria for nutrient-content claims that manufacturers make about foods. Examples are "low sodium" and "reduced in sodium."
- FDA has not exercised its regulatory authority to limit the amount of salt added to processed foods; however, the agency is conducting research in this area. In 2005, the Center for Science in the Public Interest submitted a Citizen's Petition to FDA requesting that the agency make changes to the regulatory status of salt, including requiring limits on the amount of salt in processed food. In November 2007, FDA held a public hearing in College Park, Md., on the agency's policies regarding salt in food, and solicited comments from the public about future regulatory approaches.

Will FDA be regulating salt as recommended by the Institute of Medicine report?

FDA was a sponsor of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, "Strategies to Reduce Sodium Intake in the United States," which was released by IOM on April 20, 2010. The IOM committee reviewed and recommended various ways to reduce sodium intake. The strategies recommended included actions by FDA and other government agencies and by food manufacturers, public health professionals, and consumer educators. These recommendations are being carefully reviewed and evaluated by FDA.

*This article appears on [FDA's Consumer Updates page](#)³, which features the latest on all FDA-regulated products. *Updated: May 18, 2010*

Want other ways to flavor your food without salt? Check out these ideas:

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hbp/prevent/sodium/flavor.htm>