

What You Don't Know About Salt That Could Be Killing You

Have you seen the *Andy Griffith Show* episode where two prisoners trick Barney into freeing them? Knowing Barney is sensitive about the rinky-dink Mayberry jail, the convicts describe how guards at “the big house” conduct shakedowns to confiscate hidden weapons.

To prove his jail is worth its salt, Barney marches the men out of their cell to do his own shakedown, only to have them escape out the courthouse door.

Just like con men and concealed weapons, sodium can be sneaky. It hides in all kinds of food ingredients and additives. If we did a “sodium shakedown” of what you ate yesterday, would we uncover hidden salt with the potential to cause bodily harm?

Shakedown of the Typical American Diet

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans advocate eating less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium (about one teaspoon of salt) per day. But the average American consumes 1/2 teaspoon more than that—about 3,400 milligrams of sodium per day.

That extra 1/2 teaspoon doesn't sound so bad until you learn the second part of the recommendations. Only 1,500 milligrams of sodium per day are suggested for:

- Anyone with hypertension (high blood pressure)
- All people over 40
- All African-American adults

Two out of three Americans fall into one of these “salt sensitive” groups. So for most of us, the typical 3,400 milligrams of sodium is *more than double* what we should be

consuming.

Why Is Salt a Problem?

For many people, greater sodium intake is directly linked to higher blood pressure. When your blood pressure goes up, so does your risk of stroke and heart disease.

Where’s the Sodium?

Let’s do a shakedown of your diet to find hidden salt. Believe it or not, your saltshaker is usually not the culprit. According to the American Heart Association, more than 75 percent of our sodium intake comes from salt added during manufacturing, such as processed foods and mass-produced restaurant meals. The rest comes from the natural salt content of foods and what we sprinkle on while cooking and eating.

Studies show that when consumers eat reduced-sodium foods, they usually don’t add salt at the table to compensate. So the best way to cut your sodium intake is to make changes before the food comes to the table—what you buy and how you prepare it. Steering clear of processed foods and not using salt in cooking are a great start.

Here are substitutions that will lower your total sodium intake:

INSTEAD OF . . .	CHOOSE THIS
canned vegetables	fresh or frozen veggies
dill pickles	sweet pickles, cucumber slices
canned soups and broths	low sodium broths and soups
seasoned rice or pasta mixes	plain rice or pasta flavored with herbs and spices

sauc ^{es} , marinades or salad dressings	make your own or choose lower sodium brands
pepperoni or sausage on pizza	plain ground beef or ground turkey cooked with spices
processed meats (cold cuts, hot dogs, bacon, etc.)	roasted meats like turkey breast, chicken, pork loin or roast beef
frozen entrees (lasagna, mac & cheese)	homemade entrees made with herbs & spices
flavored or microwave popcorn	air-popped popcorn: spray with cooking spray and season with herbs & spices
pretzels and flavored nacho chips	unsalted pretzels and plain potato chips
salted or dry roasted nuts	unsalted or raw nuts
salt in cooking	fresh or dried herbs, spices, citrus juices, cooking wine
salt shaker	Mrs. Dash or other salt-free seasonings, pepper shaker or mill

When in doubt about a food's sodium content, check the amount of sodium per serving on the nutrition label. Remember, eating two servings will double your sodium intake. In processed foods, you'll see oodles of additives and preservatives on the ingredient list that contain the word *sodium*. That's your signal to put the box back on the shelf.

Limiting sodium while eating out can be tricky. Many menu items at fast food establishments and sit-down restaurants are loaded with salt or monosodium glutamate (MSG), a salty flavor-enhancer. When ordering at restaurants, always request that your meal is prepared without salt and MSG.

What About Potassium?

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans also recommend that we eat potassium-rich foods, such as fruits and vegetables. That's because getting enough potassium may help counterbalance dietary sodium and lower blood pressure. The recommended potassium intake for adults is 4,700 milligrams per day. To see a chart of selected foods and the amounts of potassium they contain, [click here](#).

Good sources of potassium include:

- Fruits (especially apricots, avocados, bananas, cantaloupe, honeydew, grapefruit, kiwifruit, oranges, mangoes, papaya, prunes)
- Vegetables (especially beets, greens, potatoes, pumpkin, spinach, sweet potatoes, tomatoes)
- Legumes, nuts and seeds
- Milk and yogurt
- Whole grains

Salt substitutes that replace some of the sodium with potassium are available, but can be harmful for some people, especially anyone with kidney problems. Always check with your doctor before using products containing supplemental potassium. Getting potassium from foods is your best bet.

The Bottom Line

Too much sodium can adversely affect your health. Conduct your own shakedown to nab sneaky sources of hidden salt and get rid of them. Stick to a diet that emphasizes fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats and low-fat dairy products as a prudent approach to increasing potassium and other minerals necessary for good blood pressure control.

To read the chapter on sodium and potassium from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, [click here](#).

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