

“What’s the story with sodium?”

Sodium has been getting a lot of attention lately. And for good reason.



Americans are consuming much too much sodium, and it’s causing serious health problems. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that Americans age two and older consume an average of 3,500 milligrams (mg) of sodium per day. The recommended maximum is 2,300 mg, which is about the same as a teaspoon of salt. Individuals who are 51 years of age or older, have high blood pressure, diabetes or chronic kidney disease or are African Americans of any age, should limit sodium to 1,500 mg per day.

Why is too much sodium unhealthy?

Because it increases the risk for high blood pressure, which, in turn, increases the risk for heart disease, stroke and kidney disease. The CDC estimates that if everyone followed their proper guidelines for sodium consumption, there would be 120,000 fewer cases of heart disease and as many as 66,000 fewer strokes each year.

Where does sodium come from?

You’ll be surprised to learn that only 5% to 10% of our sodium intake comes from the salt shaker, and only 5% comes from salt added during home cooking. The vast majority of sodium comes from packaged and processed foods, store-bought foods and restaurant food. Many single restaurant meals—just one meal—will supply you with a full day’s worth of sodium. Some have more than four days’ worth!

Foods that are high in sodium include yeast breads, chicken and mixed chicken dinners, pizza, pasta and cold cuts. Canned goods are also very high in sodium. Condiments such as soy sauce, mustard and ketchup contain high levels of sodium, as well.

There are many things you can do to reduce your sodium intake:

- Read the nutrition label on food packages. It’s called the Nutrition Facts Panel, and it lists the % Daily Value for sodium. If the value is 5% or less, the food is low in sodium. If it’s 6% to 20%, the food contains a moderate amount of sodium. Anything above 20% is high.
- Eat food that is rich in potassium, including green vegetables and fruits from vines.
- Eat unsalted snacks.
- When you go to a restaurant, request that your food be prepared with no salt.
- Eat unprocessed foods, like fresh fruits and vegetables.
- If you eat food from a can, be sure to drain and rinse the food thoroughly.
- Season your food with pepper, herbs, citrus and salt-free spices.
- Pay attention to the food packaging, and try to eat foods with very low or low amounts of sodium. (Very low sodium = 35 mg or less per serving; low sodium = 140 mg or less per serving.)