

“Salt”, “sodium”, “table salt”, “sea salt”. These words are so often used interchangeably. No matter what you call it, Americans are eating too much of it. According to the USDA, on average Americans ages 2 and older are consuming 3,400mg of sodium each day. The recommended intake from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans is just 2,300 mg per day or 1,500 if you are in a risk group with hypertension, chronic kidney disease, or diabetes.

To put that into perspective, one tablespoon of salt equals about 2,300 mg of sodium.

The chemical name for salt, sodium chloride, reveals that sodium is part of the makeup of salt. In fact, salt is about 40% sodium by weight. Sodium plays a major role in maintenance of blood volume and blood pressure. It also contributes to fluid balance in our bodies. When consumed in moderation, sodium can be an integral part of a healthy diet. Evidence shows that lower sodium intakes contribute to lower blood pressure.

So, why are so many Americans consuming almost two thirds the recommended amount?

We often think if we don't pick up the salt shaker, we are really not using that much salt. However, research shows that most people's salt intake comes from processed and prepared foods. Things like bread, cheeses, deli meats, canned soups, fast food, frozen dinners, commercial salad dressings, condiments, and pickled foods just to name a few.

Many foods naturally contain salt including dairy foods, vegetables, meat, and seafood. The addition of salt when cooking also contributes to high sodium intakes. Sodium is also found in many over the counter medications, especially sleeping aids and antacids including Alka Seltzer. Be sure to read the labels and consult your physician if you use the medications regularly.

With all the sources of sodium, both hidden and evident, what are simple strategies to reduce our sodium intake?

First, we need to be mindful of the salt shaker and seasonings we add to our foods. It takes about 21 days to train your tongue to enjoy a lower salt diet. Begin by reducing salt amount by even one fourth your normal amount and soon you will notice foods seeming over salted, especially when dining out. You can also add fresh herbs and spices to your dishes to flavor your foods instead of salt. Steer clear of dishes with added gravy or sauces which are packed with sodium.

Next, try using lower sodium versions of your favorite ingredients when you cook at home. Try “no salt added” varieties of canned goods or rinse your regular canned goods under running water before using. When possible, use fresh or frozen versions of fruits and vegetables. Use reduced sodium broths and stocks or make your own to better control the sodium content.

The best way to reduce your sodium intake is to reduce your intake of processed and pre-packaged foods. Fresh is best when it comes to purchasing foods and will also provide other nutrients needed for a balanced diet.

Sources: Michigan State University Extension, University of Delaware Cooperative Extension