

How to Eat Less Salt

What makes salt harmful?

Salt is made up of 40% sodium and 60% chloride. Eating too much sodium can increase your blood pressure. High blood pressure is related to all sorts of problems, like heart attacks, strokes, kidney problems, etc.

How much salt can I eat?

Most people eat about twice as much salt as they should. Generally, you should eat no more than 2300 milligrams (100 mmol) of sodium a day, which equals about 1 teaspoon of table salt a day. Keep in mind that this includes *all* salt consumed, including that used in cooking and at the table.

If you have high blood pressure, are 40 or older, or are African American, your healthcare provider might advise eating no more than 1500 milligrams (65 mmol) of sodium a day.

What are some ways that I can reduce the amount of salt I eat?

Salt is found naturally in many foods. But processed foods account for most of the salt that people eat. Processed foods that are high in salt include regular canned vegetables and soups, frozen dinners, lunchmeats, instant and ready-to-eat cereals, and salty chips and other snacks.

Read food labels to choose products low in salt. You might be surprised at some foods that contain a lot of sodium, such as those containing baking soda, soy sauce, and monosodium glutamate (MSG). Some medicines, especially antacids and effervescent formulas (e.g., *Alka-Seltzer*), have sodium. Check labels or ask your pharmacist.

Restaurant meals can have a lot of salt as well. If there's no information about salt content available, ask your server to help you make a low-sodium choice. Learn which meals are lower in sodium at all your favorite places, and stick with those.

Before trying salt substitutes, check with a healthcare provider, especially if you have high blood pressure. Salt substitutes usually contain potassium chloride. Too much potassium chloride can be harmful for people with certain medical conditions, or for those taking certain medicines.

Note that there can be differing amounts of sodium in the same amount of different types of salt.

- One teaspoon table salt = 6 grams = 2400 milligrams sodium
- One teaspoon sea salt = 5 grams = 2000 milligrams sodium
- One teaspoon *Diamond Crystal* kosher salt = 2.8 grams = 1120 milligrams sodium

Tips for reducing your salt intake:

- Buy fresh, plain frozen, or canned “with no salt added” vegetables.
- Use fresh poultry, fish, and lean meat, rather than canned or processed types.
- Use herbs, spices, and salt-free seasoning blends in cooking and at the table.
- Cook rice, pasta, and hot cereal without salt. Cut back on instant or flavored rice, pasta, and cereal mixes, which usually have added salt.
- Choose “convenience” foods that are low in sodium. Cut back on frozen dinners, pizza, packaged mixes, canned soups or broths, and salad dressings. These often have a lot of sodium.
- Rinse canned foods, such as tuna and vegetables, to remove some sodium.
- When available, buy low- or reduced-sodium or no-salt-added versions of foods.
- Choose ready-to-eat breakfast cereals that are low in sodium.

Portions of this patient handout were adapted from the National Institutes of Health brochure, “Your Guide to Lowering Blood Pressure.” The full guide can be accessed by going to www.nhlbi.nih.gov or by calling 301-592-8573. Ask for publication No. 03-5232.