

Sodium - Are you getting too much?

If you're trying to eat less salt and think that just a pinch here or a dash there is fine, you're kidding yourself. Even that little extra bit can lead to unhealthy levels of sodium. About 11% of the sodium in the average American diet comes from adding salt or other sodium-rich condiments while cooking or eating. But the majority of sodium (77%) comes from eating prepared or processed foods. Sodium is an essential part of the diet, but only in small amounts. Sodium helps maintain the right balance of fluids in the body, helps transmit nerve impulses and influences the contraction and relaxation of muscles.

People who are sodium-sensitive retain sodium more readily, leading to excess fluid retention and increased blood pressure. If you're sodium-sensitive, extra sodium in your diet increases your chances of developing high blood pressure, a condition that can lead to cardiovascular and kidney disease.

So how much sodium do we really need? Various organizations, including the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine, have published recommendations for daily intake; between 1,500 and 2,400 milligrams (mg) for healthy adults. An even lower sodium intake has more beneficial effect on blood pressure. If you are older than 50 and have health conditions such as high blood pressure, chronic kidney disease or diabetes, you may be more sensitive to the blood pressure raising effects of sodium. As a result, those individuals should aim for a sodium intake at the lower end of the range recommended for healthy adults. Talk to your doctor about the sodium limit that is best for you. Where does sodium come from? Three main sources are: 1. processed and prepared foods such as canned vegetables, soups, luncheon meats, and frozen ;food manufacturers use salt or sodium to preserve and improve the taste and texture of foods. 2. sodium containing condiments, one teaspoon of table salt has 2,325 mg of sodium; a tablespoon of soy sauce contains 1,005 mg of sodium; adding these or other sodium-laden condiments to your meals, either while cooking or at the table, raises the sodium content of food dramatically. 3. natural sources of sodium, sodium naturally occurs in some foods, such as meat, poultry dairy products and vegetables.

You can control your sodium intake in several ways, be a savvy shopper and read the nutrition labels on food, eat more fresh and fewer processed foods, opt for low sodium products, limit you use of sodium-laden condiments, use herbs and other flavorings to enhance the flavor of food. Your taste for salt is acquired, so it's reversible. Many people who decrease their salt intake gradually find that in a few weeks, they no longer miss it.