

Lowering Sodium in Your Diet

What is sodium?

Sodium is a mineral that is needed for good health and is present in all foods. Most people eat more sodium than they need. If the body cannot get rid of the extra sodium, fluid builds up. Extra fluid increases the work of the heart and kidneys, and may increase blood pressure. Eating less sodium may help control these problems. You will sometimes see the term sodium abbreviated “Na,” as in NaCl (sodium chloride), which is **table salt**.

The current guideline for how much sodium we should eat is 2,300 milligrams (mg). The guideline is even lower at 1,500 mg for those over 50 years old, with high blood pressure and for African Americans. These sodium goals can be hard for some people to reach, especially if they are eating large amounts of sodium now. Many people can get to the lower sodium goal over time by making small changes to their diets. This handout can help you start to do this.

Sodium Guidelines

Even low sodium or sodium-free foods contain small amounts of sodium. To choose foods that are healthier for you, look for these labels:

- **Sodium-free:** less than 5 milligrams of sodium per serving
- **Very low-sodium:** 35 milligrams or less per serving
- **Low-sodium:** 140 milligrams or less per serving
- **Reduced sodium:** usual sodium level is reduced by 25 percent
- **Unsalted, no salt added or without added salt:** made without the salt, but still has the sodium that is a natural part of the food

Know Your Salt

When you are trying to lower the sodium in your diet, even a small amount of salt has a lot of sodium in it.

Amount of sodium in salt:

- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt has 600 milligrams of sodium
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt has 1,200 milligrams of sodium
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt has 1,800 milligrams of sodium
- 1 teaspoon salt has 2,300 milligrams of sodium
- 1 teaspoon baking soda has 1,000 milligrams of sodium

How can I limit sodium?

General tips:

- Slowly cut back on the amount of salt that you add when cooking or eating foods until you **do not use any salt**.
- **Avoid seasoned salts.** These include onion salt, celery salt, lite salt, low-sodium salt and sea salt. Accent, meat tenderizers and lemon pepper should also be avoided.
- Be careful if you choose a salt substitute. Many substitutes have large amounts of potassium in them which can cause medical problems for some people. Lite salts contain sodium in smaller amounts, but they are still too high for people who need to restrict sodium. Ask your doctor or dietitian if a salt substitute is okay for you.

Avoid food where large amounts of salt or sodium have been added:

- All cured or smoked meats such as Canadian bacon, salt pork, ham, luncheon meat, sausage, canned or dried beef, bacon, wieners (including products made from soy products and turkey), sardines, smoked fish and pepperoni
- Processed cheese and cheese spreads such as American cheese, Velveeta and Cheese Whiz
- Products made with baking soda and baking powder, such as self-rising flour, most baking mixes, canned bread products, and frozen pancakes and waffles
- Most restaurant foods
- Packaged convenience foods, such as macaroni and cheese, Hamburger Helper, Chef-Boy-Ardee meat dinners, Dinty Moore, regular frozen TV dinners and pot pies or Lipton's Noodles and Sauce or Rice and Sauce mixes
- Packaged potato, rice and stuffing mixes such as Rice-a-Roni and Stove Top Stuffing
- Frozen vegetables in cream or cheese sauces; vegetables cooked with meat fat (greens); canned regular vegetables; regular tomato or V-8 juice
- Salted snack foods such as crackers, pretzels, potato chips, corn chips, cheese puffs, fried pork rinds and salted nuts
- Regular canned soups; dried and instant soup mixes; frozen soups; bouillon cubes, granules or powder; consommé; homemade soups made with ham, ham bones, salted fish or meats
- Canned or packaged gravy and sauce mixes
- All sports drinks such as Gatorade or Powerade
- Brined or pickled vegetables such as sauerkraut and pickles (sweet and dill), commercial pickled vegetables, pickle relish, and olives (green and ripe)
- Chili sauce, soy sauce, steak sauce, Worcestershire sauce, BBQ sauce, cooking wine, cooking sherry, imitation bacon bits, meat tenderizers and marinades

Eat these foods in limited amounts:

- Frozen entrees with 500 mg sodium or less, such as Lean Cuisine, Weight Watchers or Healthy Choice
- Natural cheese such as cheddar or Swiss up to 2 ounces a day, or cottage cheese up to ½ cup a day
- Low-sodium tomato or V-8 juice up to ½ cup a day
- Regular or fat free salad dressing up to 2 tablespoons a day
- Buttermilk up to 2 cups a day
- Catsup and mustard up to 2 tablespoons a day
- Canned tomato puree and tomato paste ¼ cup a day (if used in a recipe, do not add extra salt). Limit regular tomato sauce to ½ cup a day.
- Baking powder, baking soda (use as an ingredient for baking only)
- Reduced sodium soups up to ½ cup a day

Foods that do not need to be limited that are lower in sodium:

- Fresh meat, poultry, game or fish without added salt
- Commercially prepared salt-free soups and homemade soups using allowed ingredients.
- Fresh or frozen plain vegetables
- Fresh, frozen or canned fruits and fruit juices
- Dried beans, peas, lentils, and unsalted nuts and seeds
- Regular bread, unsalted crackers and pretzels, plain pasta, rice and potatoes.
- Regular margarine, mayonnaise and vegetable oils
- Homemade gravies and sauces using allowed ingredients
- Milk, soda pop, sparkling water
- Herbs, spices and herb blends that do not contain salt, such as Mrs. Dash

Talk to your doctor, nurse or dietitian if you have any questions or concerns about lowering sodium in your diet.