



# Why Should I Limit Sodium?

You may have been told by your healthcare provider to reduce the salt in your diet. Table salt is sodium chloride. One teaspoon of salt contains about 2,300 mg of sodium.

You need a certain balance of sodium and water in your body at all times to work properly. Too much salt or too much water in your system will upset the balance. When you're healthy, your kidneys get rid of extra sodium to keep the correct balance.



## What's bad about sodium?

Too much sodium in your system causes your body to retain (hold onto) water. This puts an extra burden on your heart and blood vessels. In some people, this may lead to or raise high blood pressure. Having less sodium in your diet may help you lower or avoid high blood pressure. People with high blood pressure are more likely to develop heart disease or have a stroke.

## How much sodium do I need?

Most people eat too much sodium, often without knowing it. The average American eats about 3,400 mg of sodium a day.

- The American Heart Association recommends no more than 2,300 milligrams (mgs) a day and an ideal limit of no more than 1,500 mg per day for most adults.
- Your doctor may tell you to cut salt out completely.

## What are sources of sodium?

Most of the sodium in our diets comes from adding it when food is being prepared. Pay attention to food labels, because they tell how much sodium is in food products.

For example: foods with 140 mg or less sodium per serving are considered low in sodium.

Here's a list of sodium-containing compounds to limit in your diet:

- Salt (sodium chloride or NaCl)
- Monosodium glutamate (MSG)
- Baking soda and baking powder
- Disodium phosphate
- Any compound that has "sodium" or "Na" in its name

Some over-the-counter and prescription medicines also contain lots of sodium. Talk to your health care provider and make it a habit of reading the labels of all over-the-counter drugs, too.

## What foods should I limit?

The best way to reduce sodium is to avoid prepackaged, processed and prepared foods, which tend to be high in sodium. Watch out for the "Salty 6" — the top six common foods that add the most salt to your diet. Read food labels and chose the lowest level of sodium you can find for these items:

(continued)



- Breads and rolls
- Pizza
- Soup
- Cold cuts and cured meats
- Poultry
- Sandwiches

These are some other foods can also be sources of “hidden” sodium:

- Cheeses and buttermilk
- Salted snacks, nuts and seeds
- Frozen dinners and snack foods
- Condiments (ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise)
- Pickles and olives
- Seasoned salts, such as onion, garlic and celery salts
- Sauces, such as barbeque, soy, steak, and Worcestershire

**How can I cook with less salt and more flavor?**

- Avoid adding table salt to foods.
- Use herbs and spices to add flavor to foods.
- Eat fresh fruits, vegetables, lean meats, skinless poultry, fish, and tuna canned in water.
- Choose unsalted nuts and low-sodium canned foods. Cook dried peas and beans.

- Use products made without added salt; try low-sodium bouillon and soups and unsalted broth.
- Rinse canned vegetables, beans and shellfish to reduce salt.
- Sprinkle vinegar or citrus juice on foods just before eating. Vinegar is great on vegetables like spinach.

**What about eating out?**

Controlling your sodium intake doesn’t mean spoiling the pleasure of eating out. But order carefully. Consider these tips for meals away from home:

- Select fresh greens and fruits when available. Ask for oil and vinegar to top your salad or dressing on the side.
- Be specific about what you want and how you want your food prepared. Request that your dish be prepared without added salt.
- Remember portion control. You can always bring home a to-go box!

**HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?**

- 1** Call **1-800-AHA-USA1** (1-800-242-8721), or visit **heart.org** to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2** Sign up to get *Heart Insight*, a free magazine for heart patients and their families, at **heartinsight.org**.
- 3** Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at **heart.org/supportnetwork**.

**Do you have questions for the doctor or nurse?**

Take a few minutes to write your questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider.

For example:

- What’s my daily sodium limit?**
- Is there sodium in the medicine I take?**



We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one. Visit **heart.org/answersbyheart** to learn more.

