KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension
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Shake the Salt Habit for Better Health

Have you ever stopped to consider how much salt you consume each day? Sodium is found in many of the foods we eat, especially processed and packaged foods. Even foods marketed as "healthy" can contain surprisingly high amounts of sodium.

While our bodies need some sodium to function properly, most Americans consume far more than necessary. For healthy adults, the recommended daily limit is approximately 2,300 milligrams of sodium, which is about one teaspoon of salt. For people with high blood pressure or other health concerns, the recommended amount may be even lower.

Sodium is especially common in processed foods such as breads and rolls, sandwiches, deli meats, canned soups, canned vegetables, burritos, tacos, and frozen meals. Reading Nutrition Facts labels can be eye-opening and is a good first step toward reducing sodium intake.

Too much sodium causes the body to retain water. When excess water enters the bloodstream, it increases the volume of blood flowing through the blood vessels, which can raise blood pressure. Over time, high blood pressure increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease.

Tips for Reducing Sodium

One of the most effective ways to lower your sodium intake is to carefully read food labels. Look for products labeled "no salt added" or "low sodium." Keep in mind that foods labeled "reduced sodium" may still contain significant amounts of sodium compared to naturally low-sodium foods.

Condiments are another common source of hidden sodium. Compare labels on products such as:

- Soy sauce
- Salad dressings
- Dips
- Ketchup
- Pickles
- Marinara sauce
- Salsa

When cooking at home, try these strategies:

- Use less salt during food preparation.
- Add flavor with herbs, spices, garlic, onions, citrus, and vinegar.
- Drain and rinse canned vegetables and beans before using them.
- Use flavorful cooking techniques such as grilling, roasting, braising, or searing.
- Choose lower-sodium versions of your favorite foods whenever possible.

Before using a salt substitute, talk with your healthcare provider. Many salt substitutes contain potassium, which may not be appropriate for people with certain heart or kidney conditions.

Watch Sodium When Dining Out

Restaurant meals are often high in sodium. Be especially cautious of menu items described as cured, marinated, pickled, smoked, teriyaki, barbecued, or served in broth. Foods served with soy sauce, cocktail sauce, or other prepared sauces can also be significant sources of sodium.

Don't hesitate to ask for sauces and dressings on the side or request modifications to your order. Chinese food, in particular, can be high in sodium because of the sauces used in many dishes. Requesting sauce on the side allows you to enjoy the flavor while controlling how much sodium you consume.

Reducing sodium doesn't mean sacrificing taste. By experimenting with herbs, spices, citrus, and other seasonings, you can create delicious meals with less salt. Small changes can make a big difference over time. Your heart, blood vessels, and overall health will benefit from every step you take toward a lower-sodium lifestyle.