
"Understanding Salt and Sodium"

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VOLUME 22 NO. 2*

SODIUM IS ESSENTIAL TO LIFE.

Sodium is so important, in fact that humans have a specific sensor on the tongue that can detect salt. Thousands of years ago, when the diet of humans was potassium-rich and sodium poor, this sensor for salt was a crucial survival tool. Nature, in her infinite wisdom, devised a way to help humans (as well as animals) seek out salty foods so they could be assured of receiving adequate sodium from their diets. This is important because sodium - often found in the form of sodium chloride or salt - plays countless roles in the body.

To begin with, sodium is crucial for maintaining the health of every cell in the human system. It permeates the fluid between cells (often called "extracellular fluid"). These two materials need to be in constant dynamic balance so nutrient and waste can take place across cell membranes. If either of these minerals is deficient or in excess cell permeability becomes compromised and the health of all the cells suffers.

Besides being a component of extracellular fluid that bathes every living cell, sodium is important in two other "salty oceans" in the body - our blood and our lymphatic fluid. It is also necessary for the production of hydrochloric acid, the digestive enzyme secreted by the stomach in order to digest protein. Along with potassium, sodium is required for the proper functioning of our nerves and the contraction of our muscles. (The heart, as you may know, is our hardest - working muscle.) Finally, sodium is necessary to maintain several kinds of equilibrium - fluid balance, electrolyte balance and pH (acid/alkaline) balance - which are all of the utmost importance to the body.

With the many crucial roles sodium plays, it's clear that if we had no sodium, we would cease to exist. Obtaining adequate, easily absorbable sodium from foods then is important for maintaining health, but obtaining too much of the wrong kinds of sodium is harmful.

Like fat, Sodium and fat are nutrients we need for health, but not all forms of them are healthy.

Most of us already know that excessive salt consumption contributes to the development of high blood pressure but recent research shows that it is also associated with strokes, calcium deficiency and osteoporosis, fluid retention, weight gain, stomach ulcers and stomach cancer. However, reducing sodium too much can be just as harmful as consuming large amounts of it. Too little can cause spasms, poor heart rhythms, sudden death and even increase the risk of heart attack in hypertensive patients. Understanding the role sodium plays in the body and the difference between "good" and "bad" sources of sodium will help you get to salt out of your diet while still meet your sodium needs.

Just how much salt do we consume: According to The Sodium Counter (Pocket Books, 1993), the average American's salt intake is two to three teaspoons a day. This may not sound like a lot, but it provides 4,000 to

6,000 milligrams of sodium a day - which can double the Food and Drug Administrations maximum recommended daily quantity of 2,400 milligrams.

No other mammal eats this much salt and no other mammal has the health problems we do. High blood pressure, for example, was never even seen in animals until researchers found they could induce it either by surgery or by introducing large amounts of salt into animal diets.

We unknowingly absorb excessive salt not only from the food we consume, but also from an unsuspected source, the salt softened water in which we bathe. Since the American Heart Association now warns that salt-softened water can cause an elevated sodium level, many health conscious Americans no longer drink salt-softened water. Few of us, however realize that we receive a lot of unwanted sodium every time we take a shower or a bath or wash clothes in softened water. Sodium is very efficiently absorbed through the skin and topically ingested salt has become a common culprit of excess sodium.

The sodium we consume from food and water is only part of the problem. The highly refined nature of common table salt is the other part. Although our bodies are not designed to handle large amounts of sodium, healthy individuals usually can tolerate some excess sodium if it is in a naturally occurring form that our bodies can readily use or excrete. Commercial table salt used in our food and to soften water, however, is the furthest thing from this ideal. During the refining of table salt, natural sea salt or rock salt is stripped of more than 60 trace minerals and essential macro-nutrients.

Commercial refined salt is not only stripped of all its minerals, besides sodium and chloride, but it is also heated at such high temperatures that the chemical structure of the salt changes. In addition, it is chemically cleaned and bleached and treated with anticaking agents which prevent salt from mixing with water in the salt container. Unfortunately the anticaking agents perform the same function in the human body, so refined salt does not dissolve and combine with the water and fluids present in our system. Instead it builds up in the body and leaves deposits in organs and tissue, causing severe health problems.

Two of the most common anticaking agents used in the mass production of salt are sodium alumino-silicate and alumino-calcium silicate. These are both sources of aluminum, a toxic metal that has been implicated in the development of Alzheimer's disease and that certainly does not belong in a healthy diet. To make matters worse, the aluminum used in salt production leaves a bitter taste in salt, so manufactures usually add sugar in the form of dextrose to hide the taste of the aluminum. Refined sugar - as I explained in my previous book, *Get the Sugar Out* (Harmony Books 1996) - severely disrupts the equilibrium of the body and is associated with the development of more than 60 diseases.

Whether you consider the minerally unbalanced condition of the salt we use, the anticaking agents that prevent salt from doing some of its most important jobs in the body, or the chemicals and sugar that are added to it, table salt should be avoided because it is, without a doubt, hazardous to human health.

However, there are alternatives to commercial table salt. Unrefined sea salt and RealSalt ® are good salts the body can use for many of the roles sodium plays.

RealSalt is a pollutant- free salt extracted from an ancient sea bed in Utah. It is not altered with coloring, additives or bleaching and it is not kiln dried. It also has a full compliment of trace minerals, including iodine. For all of these reasons, RealSalt is the brand of salt I recommend most often. The maker of RealSalt also sells an ultra-small, convenient salt shaker that is perfect for all-our dining out and traveling needs.

Contrary to popular belief, getting hazardous salt out of your diet and controlling your intake isn't as simple as passing up the use of the salt shaker. In fact, if you're the average American, throwing away your salt shaker will hardly make a dent in your sodium intake because salt added at the table is minimal compared to the salt

that is hidden in the processed foods we eat every day. Salt is added so insidiously and so routinely to foods by manufacturers that it is difficult to escape it. From obviously salted snack foods like chips, pretzels and roasted party nuts to basic staples like soups, and breads, salt is there. It's even hidden in cereals like cornflakes, and desserts like instant chocolate pudding.

Become a label reader. No matter where you buy your food, you have to pay attention to what's in it. Don't forget that the overwhelming majority of the salt Americans consume is "hidden" in processed foods. This means you have to be skeptical about every food you're thinking of buying. If you do nothing else to lower your sodium intake, read those labels and don't let the "hidden" sodium sneak past you.

Read the number of sodium milligrams listed on the Nutrition Facts label of the food you're considering buying. Although sodium requirements differ for each individual, use this as a rule of thumb: focus on buying low-sodium foods - foods that have 140 milligrams or less of sodium per serving - and make these your staples. (If you need additional sodium in your diet, add extra salt at the table.)

The use of salt in the cooking and processing of foods is so widespread that getting the salt out clearly requires a multi-dimensional approach. It means developing a "salty savvy" - learning where salt normally is found and how to do without it creatively and tastefully. The 501 tips in my book will help you do exactly that. They were written to give helpful hints for people wanting to reduce their sodium intake as well as for salt-sensitive individuals who need to severely restrict their sodium intake.

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Editors Note:

Whether you have been diagnosed as salt sensitive, have a medical condition which is exacerbated by high levels of sodium or are interested in restricting your salt intake to acceptable levels. Ann Louise Gittleman's book *Get The Salt Out: 501 Simple Ways to Cut the Salt Out of Any Diet* (Three Rivers Press, 1996) will be a valuable addition to your natural health library.

It is also important to remember that the proper salt when used in moderation either as an ingredient in cooking or added at the table is not a problem. Salt, along with sweet, sour and bitter, is one of our four basic tasters. It can help bring out the flavor in most raw or cooked foods. However, many chefs and connoisseurs agree the best time to add salt is after the food is prepared in order to accommodate individual tastes. As Ann Louise says, she carries a small shaker of RealSalt® when traveling or dining out. Two years ago at a health food show I tried the RealSalt taste test and have used it regularly since then. RealSalt is available at your health food store. If you would like to try their taste test or for information on the traveling salt shaker, you can contact the company directly at 1-800-367-7258

RealSalt® is also available from the company sharing this information with you. Academy Health Services of NJ.

The RealSalt® Prices and information is found at their web site:

<http://www.academyhealthnj.com/Products/RedmondRealSalt.html> Or by calling 908-459-5577

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