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Salt and your health - Facts

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History

Salt has been a highly valued trade item throughout history, (and has been for over 2½ thousand years-mentioned by Herodotus) at several places. Salt, always used for the seasoning of food and for the preservation of things from decomposition, had from very early days a sacred and religious character. Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) said; "Salt is the master of your food. God sent down four blessings from the sky - fire, water, iron and salt" (Ibn Maja).

UNICEF reports that the body needs only minute amounts of iodine (from iodized salt) to function properly. Yet, a lack of the nutrient causes various disorders, from stunted growth to cretinism, a most serious condition. Even mild deficiency produces mental impairment. Studies estimate that children living in iodine- deficient areas forfeit up to 10 to 15 IQ points.

What is salt?

Salt is a commonly occurring mineral, the technical name of which is Sodium Chloride. The Sodium element is particularly important as it's a chemical that helps control the balance of water in the body and keeps our nerves and muscles working. The body needs a certain amount of sodium to function properly; eating the correct amount of salt also helps to maintain a healthy blood pressure, and helps cells to take up nutrients.

Why is too much salt bad?

Eating too much salt can cause it to work unpredictably, and may increase the risk of high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, fluid retention and other illnesses. Blood pressure is the pressure of blood in your arteries. About ten to 20 per cent of the population in the UK suffers from high blood pressure, which increases your risk of developing narrowed arteries. This can lead to heart problems, kidney disease and strokes. By reducing your salt intake it is possible to reduce your blood pressure and your risk of developing heart problems, so it's well worth doing.

How much salt should we eat?

Salt is essential for our health, but currently we eat, on average, intake of salt is between 9g and 10g a day, at least two and a half times what we need. The Food standards Agency is trying to reduce average salt consumption for adults from more than 9g a day to no more than 6g. They think levels should be even lower for babies and children, recommending less than 1g per day from 0-6 month; 1g per day from 7-12 months; 2g per day from 1-3 years; 3g per day from 4-6 years; and 5g per day from 7-10 years. These are maximum levels, and they advise parents to aim for less. Experts estimate that if average consumption was cut to 6g a day it would prevent 70,000 heart attacks and strokes a year.

Checking for hidden salt

A lot of foods are not obviously salty, but do contain high amounts of 'hidden salt'. It's easier to make healthier food choices if you are able to quickly check the salt content on food labels. However Salt is added to a number of foods to aid preservation and to improve taste, with the main sources being processed foods – accounting for about 75% of our intake, meat and meat products and bread. Sodium is present in additives such as monosodium glutamate and sodium bicarbonate. Small amounts of sodium can be found naturally in some foods such as eggs and fish. It is important to check the salt content of everything you eat.

The main salty processed foods are:

- Any tinned food containing salt
- Salted snacks like crisps, salted biscuits, popcorn
- Takeaway meals and high salt ready meals, sauces
- Smoked meat and fish
- Salty meats and fish such as sausages, pate
- Tinned, packet and instant soups
- Soy sauce, stock cubes, salted flavourings and gravy powder
- Meat and yeast extracts
- Hard cheese - [allowed 100g/4oz per week]

What Can You Eat?

- Fruit and vegetables - including fresh, frozen, tinned without salt and
- Juices
- Fresh meat, fish, eggs, beans and lentils
- Cereals including rice, pasta, potatoes, bread, breakfast cereals and
- Unsalted crackers
- Fresh herbs, spices, pepper, vinegar, mustard, tomato puree
- Milk, yoghurt, soft white cheese [and small amounts of 'hard' cheese]

Ways to reduce your salt intake

- Be Salt Aware

- Use a little salt in cooking
- Stop adding table salt to food once it is served
- Replace salt with herbs, garlic and spices to add flavour during cooking
- Cut right down on salty processed foods and ready meals
- Check out food labels for salt and go for lower salt choices
- Choose items with a reduced sodium content
- Carefully monitor the salt content of processed food
- Use less cheese by choosing stronger flavours
- Try unsalted butter and margarine
- Eat more fruit and vegetables - they contain potassium which balances
- the effect of salt on the body
- Foods naturally low in salt include fresh and frozen fish, poultry and unprocessed meats. They also include fruit and veg, rice, pasta and potatoes

More information

More about the Food Standard Agency's salt campaign can be found on <http://www.salt.gov.uk/> and has links to other concerned health organisations, including the Government's overview of salt from its Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN).

Useful LINKS

<http://www.bpassoc.org.uk/index.htm>

<http://www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2006/mar/saltpartners>

<http://www.eatwell.gov.uk/>