



## *Conquering your salt habit*

Salt — sodium chloride — is essential for survival. Your body depends on sodium to transmit nerve impulses, contract muscle fibers, and, along with potassium, to balance fluid levels in all your cells.

The body is so efficient at conserving this vital mineral that you need to consume only a tiny amount of sodium each day. Too much sodium sets off a cascade of physiological changes that can raise blood pressure. Over time, uncontrolled high blood pressure can stress the heart and blood vessels.

### **Simple ways to control sodium**

The Department of Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health teamed up with the Culinary Institute of America to create two dozen science-based strategies for cutting back on salt — without compromising the flavor of the foods you enjoy. Here are five of those tips.

1. **Fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables.** Our bodies need more potassium than sodium. But most Americans' diets are just the opposite, which can contribute to high blood pressure. Fruits and vegetables are naturally low in sodium, and many fruits and vegetables are good sources of potassium. Filling your plate with them will boost your potassium and shift the sodium-potassium balance in your favor.
2. **Embrace healthy fats and oils.** Unfortunately, the big low-fat and no-fat product push in the 1990s wasn't rooted in sound science. Many well-meaning product developers cut both the good and bad fats out of formulations, and in order to maintain consumer acceptance of their products, they were forced to increase levels of sugar and sodium. So skip most fat-free salad dressings and other similar products, and you'll be doing your blood pressure a favor.
3. **Stealth health.** The average person can't detect moderate changes in sodium levels, including reductions of up to as much as 25%. Many food manufacturers and restaurant companies have already made or are in the process of making substantial cuts in sodium — some all at once and some over time — that their customers will not be able to detect.
4. **Retrain your taste buds.** We can shift our sense of taste to enjoy foods with lower levels of sodium. One key to success: make the changes gradually and consistently over a period of time, rather than trying to cut back by a large amount all at once. Try this trick: combine a reduced-sodium version of a favorite product (like vegetable soup, for example) with a regular version in proportions that gradually favor the reduced-sodium version.
5. **Watch out for hidden sodium.** "Fresh" and "natural" meats and poultry may be injected with salt solutions as part of their processing, and manufacturers are not required to list the sodium content on the label. Some foods that are high in sodium may not taste especially salty, such as breakfast cereals, bakery muffins, energy drinks, and sports drinks.

For additional strategies for cutting back on salt and other ways to prevent and treat high blood pressure, buy [Hypertension: Controlling the "silent killer" \(/promotions/harvard-health-publications/hypertension-controlling-the-silent-killer\)](https://www.health.harvard.edu/promotions/harvard-health-publications/hypertension-controlling-the-silent-killer) a Special Health Report from Harvard Medical School.

**Source:** <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/conquering-your-salt-habit>

