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The Surprising Truth About Salt

Discover sneaky sodium sources, the right daily intake and more

By Karen Ansel, RD

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Special Offer

It's time to set the record straight: Sodium (a component of salt) is not bad in itself. You do need to consume some for nerve and muscle functioning, but too much can harm your heart. Salt makes you retain water—and that extra fluid can boost your blood pressure, driving up your **risk of heart disease** and stroke.

The right amount is...

The American Heart Association recommends that all Americans aim to consume less than 1,500 mg of sodium per day. Some experts, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, think you can safely eat a maximum of 2,300 mg (the amount in 1 tsp salt) if you're healthy and under age 51. If you're older, are African-American or have **high blood pressure**, diabetes or kidney disease, everyone agrees your daily cap should be 1,500 mg. But the truth is, most people exceed both of those numbers (the average person eats 3,400 mg per day), so reducing your intake is a smart move.

Identify sneaky sources

Keeping an eye on how much salt you sprinkle on your food is a good start (salt is about 40% sodium). However, a whopping 77% of sodium comes from packaged foods—and the number-one sodium source is bread. Even though bread only racks up about 150 mg a slice, Americans eat so much that it adds up quickly. Other top offenders include canned soups, frozen dinners and deli meats. Sodium also hangs out in seemingly healthy items like

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sports drinks and cottage cheese.

Protect yourself

Since you can't always see (or taste) the sodium in processed foods, **reading labels** is a must. Make sure that foods contain no more than 500 mg per serving and compare brands to look for low- or no-sodium versions of canned vegetables, beans and cottage cheese. Buying fresh produce can help: The less processed a food is, the less likely it is to be swimming in sodium.

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Surprising Fact

Too much sodium may also weaken your bones. A recent study found that postmenopausal women who had the most sodium in their diets were four times as likely to experience bone fractures as those who ate the least.

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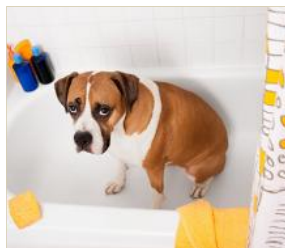
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