

Salt: The Rock We Eat

By Lauri Berkenkamp

There's one very important mineral in your shaker.

Before you say “pass the salt,” you should know more about what’s in that shaker. Your body needs the sodium that comes from salt to survive. Without enough of it in your system, you’d die. But most Americans don’t have that problem. Most of us get too much of it, says nutritionist Holly Westling. “Your body needs a minimum of between 250 and 500 mg of sodium to stay healthy. But most people take in almost 10 times that much every day,” she says. That’s much more than your body needs, and it can lead to serious health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and kidney disease—even in young kids and teens.

Where does all that extra sodium come from? You might be surprised to learn that it isn’t coming from your saltshaker. Only about 11 percent of the sodium you take in comes from table salt, says Westling. Most of the sodium you eat comes from hidden sources: packaged and processed food. “Sodium is added to almost every kind of food that comes in a package or a box. And it’s not only in foods that taste salty,” she says.

Hidden Sodium: It’s Everywhere!

Food companies use salt and sodium products as a way to preserve food to keep it fresh longer. Meats such as ham, sausage, and lunch meats contain a lot of added salt. Manufacturers add the salt to keep the meat from spoiling. Sodium also brings out other flavors in food that you don’t think of as salty. Think cakes and cookies—yes, cakes and cookies! Salt actually makes the sugar in them taste sweeter. Salt disguises the chemical taste in soft drinks. It also makes snack foods such as pretzels and crackers seem less dry.

A lot of foods already have salt in them. So the sodium adds up quickly when you add even more of it. Your body doesn’t need more than about a teaspoon (1,500 mg) of salt a day, but most people consume at least twice that without realizing it.

How Sodium Works for You

Sodium is in charge of balancing fluids in your body. It acts like a messenger too. It helps your body send and receive messages along your nerves and carry nutrients in and out of your cells. Sodium keeps your heart beating normally and your muscles contracting and relaxing properly. Without enough sodium, none of those things could happen, and your body couldn’t function properly.

Your kidneys automatically control the amount of sodium you keep in your body. If you have a little excess sodium, your kidneys pass it out of your body through your urine.

But when you take in too much, your kidneys can't get rid of it fast enough. That sodium ends up in your bloodstream. And because sodium attracts water, too much sodium in your blood means that you get too much water in your bloodstream. That extra volume puts more pressure on your veins and arteries. Your heart then has to work harder to pump the blood around your body. Over time, too much sodium makes your blood pressure go up and your kidneys tire out. Your heart can grow bigger because it has to work harder to pump your blood—which isn't a good thing.

Keep Track and Cut Back

Luckily, says Westling, there are a lot of ways you can keep your sodium levels down without missing out on anything! "When you snack on popcorn, try using unsalted butter and a sprinkle of Parmesan cheese instead of salt. Snack on carrot sticks or other crunchy veggies instead of packaged crackers or chips. For breakfast, try oatmeal instead of boxed breakfast cereal. Eat more fresh fruit—fruit is high in potassium, which helps counteract the effects of sodium in your body."

Another important thing to remember, says Westling, is that "salt is an acquired taste. That means that you learned to like the taste of salt. You can unlearn to like it too." Westling suggests you use unsalted butter, don't add extra salt to foods, and cut back on or avoid high-sodium foods for a week. You'll find that you don't crave salt as much—and will probably find those foods too salty. That's pretty easy!

Salt vs. Sodium: What's the Difference?

Table salt isn't the same thing as sodium. The salt in your saltshaker is a combination of sodium and chloride. But most people use the words *salt* and *sodium* interchangeably when they are talking about food.

Salt of the Earth

Salt has played an important role in human history. Here are a few fun facts about the history of salt.

The ancient Romans put salt on their greens to counteract bitterness. *Salted* is the origin of the word *salad*.

In the Middle Ages, people used salt to cure leather, clean chimneys, solder pipes, glaze pottery, and treat toothaches, upset stomachs, and depression.

In medieval Sweden, there was a custom to give a girl heavily salted porridge or pancakes without any drinks before she went to sleep. Her future husband would then appear in a dream and give her water to quench her thirst.

Many early roads in North America were formed by animals that constantly licked at natural salt sources. Settlers looking for salt supplies would set down roots near those licks. Buffalo, N.Y., was named for the wide road created by the animals near Lake Erie.

Source: *Salt: A World History*

Be a Label Detective

When you read food labels, watch for these words. They are all other ways to say that the food contains added sodium:

Monosodium glutamate

Baking soda

Baking powder

Disodium phosphate

Sodium alginate

Sodium nitrate

Sodium nitrite

These are some foods that are very high in sodium.

High-Sodium Surprises: Soup, Pizza, Pasta sauce, Cornflakes Hot dogs, Mustard, Barbecue sauce, Salad dressing