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Salt (sodium)

WHAT IS IT?

Salt is the name commonly used for 'sodium chloride', which is naturally found in some foods and is added to others to add flavour and preserve them. Sodium is a part of salt, and is important in our bodies for fluid balance and blood pressure control, as well as ensuring our muscles and nerves work properly.

HOW MUCH SALT DO WE NEED?

Although salt is important for the body to function, we only need a very small amount. Currently in the UK, we eat an average of around 10 grams (the equivalent of two teaspoons) of salt every day. For good health it would be better to cut this to about 6 grams of salt each day.

WHY REDUCE YOUR SALT INTAKE?

Eating less salt can prevent or treat high blood pressure (hypertension) which will protect against strokes, heart attacks and further damage to the kidneys. It is also thought to reduce the risk of developing stomach cancer and bone disease.

Cutting down on salt can also help to prevent fluid retention and to control thirst in people who need to restrict their fluid intake (see Chapter 7).

HOW CAN YOU REDUCE THE AMOUNT OF SALT YOU EAT?

Reducing the amount of salt you eat may make food taste bland at first, but after about 6–8 weeks, your tastebuds will adjust to it. If you speak to other people who have cut down on salt, they often say that they now dislike the taste of salty foods and prefer foods made with less salt.

There are three main ways to reduce your salt intake:

- eat fewer processed foods and fewer foods that are naturally high in salt;
- do not add salt at the table;
- use less salt in cooking.

EATING FEWER SALTY FOODS

Surprisingly most of the salt we eat is hidden in processed foods. This accounts for three quarters of our total intake. Only one quarter of the salt we eat comes from the salt that we add either at the table or in cooking.

Eating less of these types of food will help to cut down on salt in your diet. Fortunately, there is usually a lower salt food that you can try instead. (See the table on page 30.)

Working out whether foods are high in salt?

Many processed foods contain a high level of salt, so it is important to check food labels. At the moment most food labels state only the amount of sodium in the food. To compare the salt content of different foods, look for the 'sodium per 100g' value on the label.

TRUE OR FALSE ?

Food labelled as having 'no added salt' means it is low in salt.

- FALSE** This term just means no salt has been added in the cooking process. It does not always mean that it is low in salt.

Other labelling terms are:

Reduced sodium Means it is at least 25 per cent lower in sodium than the standard product. The food could still be high in sodium, e.g. low-sodium soy sauce is lower in sodium than standard soy sauce, but it is still very salty

Low in sodium Means a sodium content of less than 0.04 g per 100 g of food. This is a 'genuinely' low-salt food

<i>Reducing your intake of salty foods</i>	
Eat less	Choose instead
Processed and cured meats e.g. ham, bacon, sausages and tinned meats	Plain roast or grilled meat – cooked without added salt
Smoked fish	Unsmoked fresh or frozen fish; tinned fish (preferably tinned in spring water)
Ready made, tinned, packet or instant soups. Meat and vegetable extracts such as Marmite, Bovril and Oxo	Homemade soup with water, spices and herbs or other flavorings instead of stock cubes
Salted snacks such as crisps, salted peanuts, Bombay mix, chevra	Low salt crackers, rice cakes or crisps, plain unsalted popcorn
Bottled sauces e.g. ketchup, salad cream, Worcester sauce, soya sauce	Try olive oil, vinegar or homemade French dressing. Low-sodium soya sauce is available and contains about one third less salt than the standard version
Cheese – including Cheddar, blue cheeses, Parmesan, Edam etc.	Cottage cheese, ricotta and cream cheese
Tinned vegetables in brine	Use fresh or frozen vegetables or those tinned in spring water
Pickles, stock cubes, salted flavourings	Use half the amount or avoid altogether, and use herbs and spices instead

What is 'a lot'? What is 'a little'?

The salt content of foods can vary widely, as shown in the table below.

Comparison of sodium contents in different foods			
A LOT (More than 0.5 g sodium/100 g)		A LITTLE (Less than 0.1 g sodium/100 g)	
Food	Grams (g) sodium per 100 g food	Food	Grams (g) sodium per 100 g food
Salad cream	1.1	Vinegar	0.02
Cornflakes	1.0	Shredded Wheat	Less than 0.01
Corned beef	0.9	Roast beef	0.05
Cream crackers	0.6	Matzo crackers	Less than 0.01
Baked beans	0.5	Frozen green peas	Less than 0.01

DO NOT ADD SALT AT THE TABLE

Try to get out of the habit of adding salt to food without tasting it. Watch for hidden salt in many sauces and condiments such as tomato ketchup, mustard, soy sauce, chutney, pickles and brown sauce. To help keep your salt intake down, try to use these sparingly or avoid them altogether.

You may have come across salt substitutes that are promoted as a healthy alternative to salt. Some of these such as 'Lo-Salt', 'Selora' or 'Ruthmol', are made with potassium, and are not suitable for patients on a low-potassium diet.

REDUCE SALT IN COOKING

Try to cook with fresh food as often as possible rather than using ready-made or convenience foods or sauces. Remember that many manufactured flavourings can be high in salt, for example garlic or celery salt, sea salt, curry pastes and seasoning powders such as Cajun seasoning or tandoori powder.