



Ask the Dietitian

sodium intake

My doctor has told me to reduce the amount of sodium that I eat to help with my blood pressure. I haven't been adding salt to my foods for several years, but my blood pressure is still higher than he would like and he still tells me to reduce my sodium intake. Besides not adding salt to foods myself, what else should I do to reduce my sodium intake?

This is a very common question, and one that has an easy answer. Only about 15% of the sodium that the average American eats each day is what they actually add to their foods, the rest or 85% has been added by food producers and restaurants. This is the “sneaky sodium” that dietitians are always advising their patients about. By making wise choices in the grocery store and when eating out, you can easily reduce your sodium intake and likely your blood pressure. Luckily, your cravings for “salty foods” is learned, so it can be easily unlearned by being aware of “sneaky sodium” and gradually decreasing your sodium intake.

The upper intake guideline for sodium (or the most you should eat in one day) set by the USDA, Institute of Medicine (the group that sets our guidelines for all vitamins and minerals) and the American Heart Association is 2400 mg of sodium per day or roughly 1 teaspoon of salt per day for healthy people and 2000 mg of sodium per day or less for those with high blood pressure. However the average American is eating over 5000 mg of sodium every day. The majority of this sodium is coming from pre-prepared foods (frozen dinners, canned soups, canned or boxed meals) and restaurant meals.

The average can of soup is providing 800-975mg of sodium per serving or up to 1900 mg per can. Frozen dinners and boxed or canned meals often provide over 1200mg of sodium per serving. A 12 oz can of V-8 has 690mg of sodium and a 20 oz Gatorade has 270mg of sodium. A snack of 2 oz of cheddar cheese and 12 Triscuits will run you 756mg of sodium. The average restaurant meal will also provide 1500-2000mg of sodium for just one meal! So it is easy to see how your sodium intake can be higher than the recommendation!

Your best tool for keeping your sodium intake under 2400mg per day is the Nutrition Facts Label. Be sure to choose foods that have less than 200 mg sodium per serving for a snack or side dish and choose foods that have less than 700mg sodium per serving for an entire meal.

Controlling your sodium intake in restaurants can be a bit trickier since restaurants are not required to provide nutrition facts on their menus. However websites like www.calorieking.com or www.nutritiondata.com have search engines that can find that information for you for most national restaurant chains. Talking with your waiter or waitress and requesting that all foods be made without added salt will also help. For more tips, check out our Living With Low Sodium handout series.

To keep your foods interesting as you lower your sodium intake, be sure to experiment with herbs, chili powders, citrus juices like lemon and lime juice, vinegars and hot sauces as well as other low or no sodium condiments. With a little patience, you will be able to discover a world of flavors outside the salt shaker!

For more ideas on how to lower your sodium intake, be sure to call one of the Heart Center of the Rockies Registered Dietitians at (970) 221-1000 for some quick tips over the phone or to set up an appointment to review your current eating plan for sneaky sodium.

For further information please call our office and ask to speak to one of our Registered Dietitians

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