

Why Should I Limit Sodium?

Your health care professional may have told you to reduce the sodium, or salt, in your diet. Most people eat too much sodium, often without knowing it.

Your body needs sodium to work properly. It's regulated in the body by your kidneys, and it helps control your body's fluid balance. It also plays a key role in nerve and muscle function.

But too much sodium in your system causes your body to retain (hold onto) water. This may cause puffiness, bloating and weight gain.



How does too much sodium affect my heart health?

When there's extra sodium in your bloodstream, it pulls water into your blood vessels. This increases the amount of blood flowing through your blood vessels, which increases blood pressure. Over time, this may raise blood pressure or lead to high blood pressure in some people.

Having less sodium in your diet may help you avoid or lower high blood pressure.

How much sodium do I need?

Most people in the U.S. consume too much sodium. The average person in the U.S. eats about 3,400 milligrams (mg) of sodium a day.

- The American Heart Association recommends no more than 2,300 mg of sodium a day, with an ideal limit of less than 1,500 mg per day for most adults, especially for those with high blood pressure.
- Even cutting back by 1,000 mg a day can improve blood pressure and heart health.

What are sources of sodium?

Many foods contain some sodium in their natural state. But the largest amount of sodium comes from processed and packaged foods and those prepared at restaurants.

Pay attention to food labels. They tell you how much sodium is in food products. For example, foods with 140 mg or less sodium per serving are low in sodium. Sodium levels of the same type of food can vary widely. Compare the Nutrition Facts labels and select the ones with the lowest amount of sodium per serving.

Some over-the-counter and prescription medications, such as antacids, also contain lots of sodium. Ask your health care professional or pharmacist about the sodium in your medications. Make reading the labels of over-the-counter drugs a habit, too.

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What foods should I limit?

The best way to reduce sodium is to avoid packaged and prepared foods. They tend to be higher in sodium. Some common foods that add the most salt to your diet include:

- Pizza
- Bread, rolls and buns
- Sandwiches and burgers
- Burritos and tacos
- Rice, pasta and grain dishes
- Meat, poultry and seafood dishes
- Soups

These foods can also be sources of “hidden” sodium:

- Cheeses and buttermilk
- Canned vegetables
- Frozen dinners and snack foods
- Condiments, such as ketchup, mustard and mayonnaise
- Sauces, such as barbecue, soy and steak

How can I cook with less salt and more flavor?

- Flavor foods with herbs, spices, lemon, lime, vinegar or salt-free seasonings.
- Use fresh poultry, fish and lean meat, rather than canned, smoked or processed types.

- Choose unsalted nuts.
- Select low-sodium canned foods.
- Cook dried peas and beans.
- Try low-sodium soups and unsalted broth.
- Drain and rinse canned vegetables and beans to reduce sodium.
- Avoid adding table salt to foods.

What about eating out?

Controlling your sodium intake doesn’t mean spoiling the pleasure of eating out. But order carefully. Consider these tips for meals away from home:

- Look at the restaurant’s menu before going out. Check the online nutrition information if available.
- Select fresh greens and fruits when available. Ask for oil and vinegar for your salad or ask for the dressing on the side.
- Be specific about what you want and how you want it prepared. Ask that your dish be prepared without added salt.
- Remember portion control. You can always take home a to-go box!

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1 Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721) or visit heart.org to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2 Sign up for our monthly *Heart Insight* e-news for heart patients and their families at HeartInsight.org.
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at heart.org/SupportNetwork.

Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write down questions for the next time you see your health care professional.

For example:

What’s my daily sodium limit?

Is there sodium in the medication I take?

MY QUESTIONS:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk of heart disease, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit heart.org/AnswersByHeart to learn more.