

How Much Sodium Are You Eating?

Wanda M. Koszewski, Extension Nutrition Specialist

Although some sodium is good for the body, Americans typically consume about twice the amount considered healthy. Learn how to reduce sodium intake through food choices.

Our bodies need sodium to work, but usually we get more sodium than we need.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Americans over the age of 2 consume 3,436 mg of sodium each day, 77 percent of which comes from packaged, processed, store-bought, and restaurant/fast foods. Another 12 percent is found naturally in foods. The figure does not include sodium added during cooking (5 percent) or salt that is added at the table (6 percent). The current recommendation for Americans, according to the U.S. Dietary Guidelines, is to limit sodium intake to 2,300 mg or about one teaspoon of table salt per day. However, the American Heart Association and the CDC recommend lowering this recommendation to 1,500 mg or about one-half of a teaspoon of salt per day.

Public health officials are worried about sodium because there is a strong link between it and high blood pressure, and uncontrolled high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart disease, and kidney disease.

One in three Americans has high blood pressure and some do not even know it. It is estimated that 68 percent of Americans are sodium sensitive, which leads to high blood pressure. For these individuals and people who already have high blood pressure, the American Heart Association recommends no more than 1,500 mg of sodium per day. The same recommendation applies to people who have a greater incidence of high blood pressure, including adults over 40 and African Americans.

Sodium, which is both an electrolyte and a mineral in the body, helps keep the water inside and outside the cell balanced. It is also important to how nerves and muscles work, and it helps with the absorption of nutrients in the small intestine. Eating too little sodium is not usually a problem for people because sodium is found naturally in many of the foods we eat. The minimum amount of sodium a person needs to replace losses is around 180 mg/day. The Food and Nutrition Board recommends a minimum of 500 mg per day for those over 18. The 1,500 mg per day recommended by the American Heart Association is reasonable to replace sweat losses and ensure nutrient adequacy.

Lowering Sodium in Your Diet

Studies have shown that the less sodium you consume the less your taste buds crave it. So, the first step in decreasing your desire for salty foods is to gradually decrease your daily sodium intake. Start by decreasing your intake by about 500 mg per day for one month, and then continue to decrease it by 500 mg at a time until you reach a daily sodium intake that is within the recommended range.

How Much Sodium Is in the Foods You Eat?

Table 1 lists the amount of sodium in many commonly eaten foods. Foods with the highest amount of sodium are listed towards the top of the list; foods with the least amount of sodium are listed towards the bottom. To decrease your sodium intake, choose food that appear toward the bottom of the list.

A tip to remember is that according to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), a food cannot claim to be “healthy” unless the sodium content does not exceed 480 mg per serving. For example, if a can has two servings and a serving is ½ cup, that ½ cup must not exceed 480 mg of sodium.

Table I. Amount of sodium present in commonly eaten foods.

<i>Food</i>	<i>Amount</i>	<i>Amount</i>
Table salt	1 tsp	2,358 mg
Dill pickle	1 large	1,736 mg
Canned chicken-a-la-king	1 cup	1,371 mg
Baking soda	1 tsp	1,259 mg
Chicken chow mein	1 cup	1,054 mg
Chili con carne	1 cup	1,043 mg
Box meal with hamburger	1 serving	982 mg
Canned soup	1 cup	939 mg
Sauerkraut	1 cup	939 mg
Canned spaghetti and meatballs	1 cup	925 mg
Prepared potato salad	1 cup	925 mg
Chicken pot pie	1 small frozen	889 mg
Snack pretzel	10 twists	814 mg
Cheese enchilada	1 each	784 mg
Box meals	1 serving	780 mg
Pepperoni pizza	1 slice	685 mg
Tomato juice	1 cup	654 mg
Grape-nuts cereal	1 cup	629 mg
Bouillon cube	1 each	611 mg
Canned vegetables	1 cup	562 mg
Frozen waffles	4" diameter	562 mg
Bacon	3 slices	554 mg
Rice-a-Roni®	1 cup	545 mg
Package bread stuffing	½ cup	543 mg
Coleslaw-prepared with salad dressing	1 cup	521 mg
Hot dog	1 each	504 mg
Cornbread from a mix	2" square	467 mg
Low-fat microwavable dinner	1 package	465 mg
Sardines	1 small can	465 mg
Peanuts roasted and salted	1 cup	461 mg
White sauce in a jar	½ cup	442 mg
Parmesan cheese	1 oz.	433 mg
Fruit pie	1 slice from 9" pie	399 mg

<i>Food</i>	<i>Amount</i>	<i>Amount</i>
Pudding made from mix	1 cup	399 mg
Cottage cheese	½ cup	373 mg
Luncheon meat	1 oz	369 mg
Muffin	1 medium	356 mg
Raisin bran cereal	1 cup	342 mg
Ham, cured deli style	1 oz	341 mg
Bologna	1 oz	330 mg
Pork sausage links and patties	2 links or 2 patties	310 mg
Tuna, canned in oil or water	3 ½ oz can	301 m
Microwave popcorn	1 cup	296 mg
Doughnut, glazed	1 large	290 mg
Oatmeal	1 cup	283 mg
Pancake	6" diameter	278 mg
Buttermilk	½ cup	257 mg
French fries	1 medium serving	235 mg
Cake with frosting	2" piece	220 mg
Peanut butter	2 Tbsp	220 mg
Ready eat dry cereal	¾ cup	186 mg
Potato chips	15 chips	181 mg
Cheddar cheese	1 oz	176 mg
Yogurt	1 cup	172 mg
Catsup	1 Tbsp	167 mg
Saltine crackers	5 each	161 mg
Salad dressing	1 Tbsp	140 mg
Cookies	2 medium	133 mg
Beef	1 oz	113 mg
Milk	1 cup	108 mg
Ice cream	1 cup	106 mg
Chicken	1 ounce	103 mg
Fresh fruit	1 medium	< 100 mg
Fresh vegetables	1 cup	< 100 mg
Egg	1 each	< 100 mg

*Source: USDA Nutrient Database for Standard Reference.

Tips for Reducing Sodium in Your Diet

- Read the Nutrition Facts panel found on the food label. Check the “% Daily Value” per serving for sodium. Try to select foods that provide 5 percent or less of sodium per serving.
 - Try salt-free products, herbs, or spices to add flavor to food without increasing sodium content.
 - Look for these words on food labels: “no salt added,” “reduced salt,” or “low or reduced sodium.”
 - Use fresh meats rather than cured or processed meats.
 - Cut back on instant flavored rice, pasta, and cereal mixes, which have added salt.
 - Eat less restaurant or fast foods.
 - Reduce use of convenience type foods.
 - Remember that seasonings with names that end in “salt” like garlic salt and seasoning salt are high in sodium.
 - Combination spices such as lemon pepper may contain sodium. Read the ingredient list to see if salt has been added.
- Limit the use of table salt. Try these suggestions:
 - Don’t add salt to food or water while you are cooking.
 - Taste a food before you add salt.
 - Try one shake of the salt shaker rather than the number you are accustomed to shaking.
 - Add white rice to your salt shaker to slow the flow of salt.
 - Remove the shaker from the table.

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