

# Hidden Danger

If you are trying to improve your eating habits, you are probably concentrating on the more well-known health targets: lowering your calorie intake, reducing fat and cholesterol in your diet, and eating more fiber. For many people, though, there is another important dietary factor that escapes their notice. Sodium is the “hidden danger” in many foods that appear to be healthy choices. Sodium plays a big role in the body, but its consumption should be balanced.

## What is Sodium?

You may be surprised to learn that sodium is actually a metal. In nature, it occurs most commonly in the mineral salt, but is also present in small amounts in plants. Salt is the most familiar source of sodium in the human diet, but sodium is also a major component of many preservatives and artificial flavorings used in processed foods.

## Essential for Health

If you cut all sodium from your diet, you would quickly learn that it is an essential part of the body’s healthy functioning. The average body needs at least half a gram of sodium per day, but don’t worry about meeting that minimum—as you will see, most of us get far more than that in our normal diet!

Sodium works with other minerals, especially potassium, to help nerves communicate between one another. It plays a role in muscular activity, and it regulates the balance of fluids in the body, making sure that blood volume, pressure, and acidity stays within healthy boundaries. The kidneys are the primary organs that

process and regulate the sodium that you take in; if there is too much sodium, the kidneys eliminate it through urination.

## LEARN MORE

*Make smart decisions about your health and visit a physician or health specialist for advice and questions.*

### USDA Nutrition Information

[www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)

### American Society for Nutrition

[www.nutrition.org](http://www.nutrition.org)

### USDA Food Tracker

[www.supertracker.usda.gov](http://www.supertracker.usda.gov)

# REDUCING SODIUM



# HEALTHY DIRECTIONS

Sodium is a necessary  
nutrient for the human body.

On average, you need a  
teaspoon of sodium per day,  
but most of us get too much.

## HEALTHY DIRECTIONS

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## Recommended Doses

While hardly any of us have any trouble meeting the .5 gram (500 milligrams) minimum daily dosage of sodium, staying below the maximum dosage is a different story. People of all ages should avoid consuming more than 2.3 grams (2,300 milligrams) of sodium per day. Elderly and those with high blood pressure or kidney trouble should restrict intake to less than 1.5 grams (1,500 milligrams) per day.

## Dangers of Excess Sodium

The primary danger of high sodium intake is high blood pressure. The higher your blood pressure is, the harder your heart is working each time it pumps blood through the body. Consistently high blood pressure puts a heavy strain on the heart and causes it to wear out prematurely.

The kidneys have to work overtime as well to filter excess sodium from food. Overworked kidneys become less effective at removing sodium and toxins from the blood, and are vulnerable to kidney failure.



# Knowing how much sodium you are taking in is the first and most important step.

## Why Do We Crave Sodium?

Our palate naturally enjoys sodium, and it easily gets “addicted” to it. With a natural diet filled with whole grains, vegetables, and lean meats, excess sodium is not a problem. But if we begin eating processed meals and heavily salted dishes, our palate gets used to high sodium content and interprets natural foods as tasting flavorless.

Salt does bring out the natural taste of foods, and that creates a danger for seniors in particular. Age reduces the ability of the tongue to taste flavors, and to compensate seniors often use too much salt. Because seniors’ bodies need less sodium to function, this increase can be disastrous for blood pressure and the kidneys.

## High Sodium Foods

If a certain kind of food tastes very salty, you should suspect it of being high in sodium. Obvious examples include potato chips, cured meats, and frozen meals. However, there are some foods that do not taste particularly salty but are still high in sodium. Bagels, baked desserts like cake, and even breads are made with lots of salt and baking soda, another high-sodium ingredient.

The average American can reduce sodium dramatically by avoiding processed foods. These foods make use of preservatives and flavorings that are sodium-based, and while they might taste great, they often contain the bulk of your daily recommended sodium intake in a single serving!



Dieters would do well to make note of some specific foods that are high in sodium. Vegetable juice often contains as much as 25 percent of your daily sodium allowance, and canned soups are often high in sodium. Soups served at restaurants are even more dangerous—be sure to look up or ask about a soup’s sodium content before ordering it!

## Strategies for Lowering Sodium

Reducing your sodium intake is not difficult if you have the right techniques for doing so. Here are some tips that will help you keep your sodium within healthy levels:

### Awareness

*Knowing how much sodium you are taking in is the first and most important step. Train yourself to check nutrition labels and keep track of your total intake for the day. In time, you will become familiar with the sodium content of your favorite foods and will become better at estimating how much sodium other foods contain.*

### Fight Old Habits

*If your first action at a meal is to reach for the salt shaker, your first step in reducing sodium in your diet is clear. The easiest way to break the salt habit is to take your salt shaker off the table. That way, you are forced to really think about whether your meal needs salt or whether you are simply adding it out of habit.*

### Substitution

*Salt isn’t the only flavoring agent out there. There are salt substitutes on the market. Branch out in your own cooking and try herbs and spices instead of reaching for the salt. You may find that you actually prefer the different, more colorful flavors.*

## More Tips to Reduce Sodium Intake

- Use fresh cuts rather than packaged meats. Hidden extra sodium is added during processing in products like bacon and ham. Fresh cuts of beef, pork, or chicken contain lower levels of natural sodium
- Fresh fruits and vegetables are very low in sodium. Canned and frozen fruits are also low in sodium.
- Choose “fresh frozen” frozen vegetables and those which do not contain added seasoning or sauces.

## Train Your Palate

As you use less salt, don’t get discouraged if your food tastes bland at first. Your tongue gets used to certain tastes, and if you are accustomed to a salty diet, it will take some time for your tastes to change. In just a few weeks, though, you will get used to the change and salty foods will actually become less attractive to your palate.

