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The trouble with excess salt

Sodium doesn't affect everyone equally, but there's good reason to stick to moderate amounts in your diet.



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On average, Americans eat too much salt — more than a teaspoon and a half a day. Most often it doesn't come out of a shaker, but is hidden in the foods you eat. But is it really bad for your heart to eat too much, or is that just a concern for people with certain risk factors? There's been some debate on this topic, even among members of the scientific community. We asked Nancy Cook, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, for her thoughts on salt — or more precisely, sodium, a mineral that makes up 40% of salt — and how it affects your health and your heart.

Is salt really bad for your heart?

"There is a fairly undisputed effect of sodium on blood pressure," says Cook. The effect is stronger in people with high blood pressure (hypertension), a sustained blood pressure reading of 120/80 or higher. The data for an effect on cardiovascular disease are somewhat more controversial, she says, but in general, the bulk of research does seem to link lower sodium intake with both lower blood pressure and a lower risk of cardiovascular disease.

Why does salt elevate blood pressure?

When you eat too much salt, your body holds on to water in an effort to dilute it. This extra water increases your blood volume, which means your heart works harder because it's pushing more liquid through your blood vessels. More strenuous pumping by the heart puts more force on the blood vessels. Over time, this increased force can raise blood pressure and damage blood vessels, making them stiffer, which increases the risk of stroke, heart attack, and heart failure.

Do people respond differently to salt?

Yes. "Some people may be sodium-sensitive and some may not," says Cook. Some of that response to salt may be genetic. Research has found that certain people appear to be more sensitive to salt than others. These so-called salt-sensitive people typically see bigger drops in their blood pressure when they eat less salt. Other people may not see the same benefit. But generally speaking, it's beneficial for most people to be aware of salt in the diet and to limit it.

"There is an effect in most people, especially those with higher blood pressure. And blood pressure tends to rise with age," says Cook.

How much salt is too much?

Scientists don't all agree how much salt is too much. This reflects some of the challenges involved in scientific research on sodium, says Cook. For example, it's very difficult to measure the amount of sodium in the diet. Dietary questionnaires, which are often used to assess nutrient levels in research participants, aren't very accurate for sodium. Even the gold standard approach of 24-hour urine samples isn't perfectly reliable; multiple samples are required for the most accuracy. This may be why different scientists have come to different conclusions.

While some studies have suggested that concerns about high sodium levels in the diet are overblown, most large-scale studies have consistently shown cardiovascular benefits from sticking to no more than 2,300 milligrams (mg) per day, says Cook. For people with high blood pressure or other risk factors for cardiovascular disease, experts recommend even less — 1,500 mg or less of sodium each day.

"Getting down to the 2,300-mg-a-day mark would be beneficial. The average person consumes about 3,600 mg a day. So, this would mean cutting out about a third of the salt for most people," says Cook.


How can you reduce sodium in your diet?

The best way to stay on top of your sodium intake is to read food labels. A good rule of thumb is to try to ensure that each serving of food has less than 100 mg of sodium. "Crackers, snacks, and canned food typically contain a lot of sodium," says Cook. One big culprit is canned soup, but even bread can contain a surprising amount of sodium.

Making your own meals, rather than purchasing premade items, can give you more control over how much salt is in your diet. Also, instead of reaching for your salt shaker, opt instead to season food with herbs or spices.

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