

Food *for* Thought

The Healthy Choice



Nutritional News

Salt and Sodium in your Food Choices

To follow an eating style with moderate amounts of salt and sodium, you need to take a look at what they do in foods. That way, you'll have a better notion of what foods might contain sodium and salt. In turn, you'll be better able to consume a diet with moderate amounts.

Salt and other sodium containing ingredients are added in food preparation and processing for flavor first and foremost. Just a few grains of salt can bring out food's natural flavors even in sweet foods. However, sodium-containing ingredients play a broader role in the food supply.

Before the days of refrigeration, people relied on salt to preserve many foods. Salt and sodium-containing ingredients preserve food by inhibiting the growth of bacteria, yeast, and molds and so prevent food spoilage and foodborne illness. Even today, many foods that are cured use salt or an ingredient made with sodium (such as sodium nitrate) as a preservative. For example, ham, sausage, corned beef, and Canadian bacon are cured meats. Another way to preserve vegetables is to soak them in brine, or a solution of water and salt. Cucumbers and Okra are pickled in brine.

In many foods, salt affects the texture. For example, yeast breads with salt have a finer texture; salt free yeast breads tend to be coarser. In some foods, such as cheese, bread dough, and sauerkraut, salt controls the speed of fermentation. Fermentation is a process that changes the chemistry of food, and as a result, its appearance and flavor. In processed meats, including sausage, salt and sodium-containing ingredients also help hold the meat together.

Where Does Sodium Come From?

Many people think their tastebuds offer all the clues they need to the sodium content of food. However, you can't always judge the sodium content of food by its taste! Many foods with sodium don't have a salty flavor, like mustard, tarter sauce, artichokes and celery. Processed and prepared foods are the main sources of sodium in the average American diet. Because salt and sodium-containing ingredients serve several functions in the food supply, it's not surprising that processed foods contain varying levels of sodium.

Look for sodium-containing ingredients, then check the Nutrition Facts Information for the amount of sodium in one serving of the food. If the ingredient on a food label has Na, salt, soda, or sodium in its name, that's a clue for sodium. ("Na" is the scientific symbol for sodium.) Salt (sodium chloride) comes either from salt mines or from the sea.

Types of Salt

Most of today's salt is mined and comes from large deposits left by dried salt lakes throughout the world. **Table salt**, a fine-grained refined salt with additives that make it free-flowing, is mainly used in cooking and as a table condiment.

Iodized salt is table salt with added iodine (sodium iodide) particularly important in areas that lack natural iodine and is an important preventative for hypothyroidism.

Kosher salt is an additive-free coarse-grained salt. It is also used in the preparation of meat, as well as by gourmet cooks who prefer its texture and flavor.

Sea salt is the type used down through the ages and is the result of the evaporation of sea water — the more costly of the two processes. It comes in fine-grained or larger crystals.

Rock salt has a grayish cast because it's not as refined as other salts, which means it retains more minerals and harmless impurities. It comes in chunky crystals and is used predominantly as a bed on which to serve baked oysters and clams and to combine with ice to make ice cream in crank-style ice-cream makers.

Pickling salt is a fine-grained salt used to make brines for pickles, sauerkraut, etc. It contains no additives, which would cloud the brine.

Sour salt also called *citric salt*, is extracted from acidic fruits, such as lemons and limes. It's used to add tartness to traditional dishes like Borscht.

Seasoned salt is regular salt combined with other flavoring ingredients, examples being onion salt, garlic salt and celery salt.

Salt substitutes, frequently used by those on low-salt diets, are products containing little or no sodium

Taming Your Taste Buds

To enjoy what you eat is a top priority! Fortunately, foods don't need to taste bland to be healthful. *And* you don't need to give up your favorite high-sodium foods, just eat them in moderation. Here's how:

Moderate your sodium intake gradually if you're accustomed to salty tastes. Because a preference or a salty taste is learned, it takes time to unlearn it and to appreciate new flavor combinations.

Enjoy plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. Most contain only small amounts of sodium and are rich in potassium. Eat them too, as low-sodium snacks!

Choose other foods within a food group that don't have as much sodium. These can be fresh meats, poultry, fish, dry and fresh legumes, eggs, milk and yogurt. Plain rice, pasta, and oatmeal don't have much sodium either. Their sodium content only goes up if high-sodium ingredients are added during their preparation.

Season with herbs, spices, herbed vinegar, herb rubs and fruit juices. Learn to prepare food with less salt or high- sodium ingredients. For example, skip the urge to add salt to cooking water for pasta, rice, cereals, and vegetables. It's an easy way to cut back on sodium. In addition, salt toughens many vegetables, especially beans, as they're cooked. The salt draws water out of the plant cells.

Go easy on high-sodium foods. Balance these choices with foods with less sodium. Moderating sodium intake over several days is what counts.

Read the nutrition facts information on the label to find the sodium content of a packaged food. You'll

find the sodium content in milligrams for a single serving. The % Daily Value for sodium is given, too. That amount is based on 2,400 milligrams of sodium for the day.

Read the nutrition descriptions on the front of food labels for a quick read" as you walk the supermarket aisle. From soup, canned fish, vegetables, and vegetable juice...to crackers, popcorn, and snack foods...you'll find a variety of food products described as "unsalted," "no-salt added," "reduced sodium," "sodium-free," and "low in sodium."

If you need to cut back on sodium, purchase foods with less sodium. Try reduced-sodium products, which may offer more flavor than low-sodium products. And they're still lower in sodium than the traditional versions.

Whether you eat in a four-star or quick service restaurant, be sodium-conscious if you eat out on a regular basis. Move the salt shaker to another table. Recognize menu items terms that may indicate high sodium content, (pickled, smoked, au jus, soy sauce or in broth). Nibble on raw vegetables, rather than salty snacks. Go easy on condiments for burgers, hot dogs and sandwiches.

Does the terms sodium or salt appear on the front of the food label? If so, here's what the description means:

Sodium Free	Less than 5 milligrams per serving
Very Low Sodium	35 milligrams or less per serving
Low Sodium	140 milligrams or less per serving
Reduced or less Sodium	At least 25% less Sodium
Light in Sodium	50% less Sodium, restricted to foods with more than 40 calories
Salt Free	Less than 5 milligrams per serving
Low Sodium Meal	140 milligrams or less per 100 grams
Unsalted or No Salt Added	No salt added during processing

*The American Dietetic Association's
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