

## **Salt**

It is no secret that heart disease is one of Britain's major killers, with thousands of people per year suffering fatal heart attacks and strokes.

A high salt intake has been linked with hypertension (high blood pressure), which is a major risk factor in the development of heart disease and stroke.

Sodium is an essential mineral required by the body. Salt is made up of sodium and chloride, and it is sodium, which is the dietary element causing hypertension.

According to research conducted by CASH (Consensus Action on Salt and Health) people who cut back on the amount of salt in their diet by about a third reduce their risk of developing a heart attack or a stroke by 25%.

At sixty years old, three in every ten will have raised blood pressure. At seventy years the risk is even greater, with two in every five suffering from raised blood pressure.

It is however not only with age that risks increase. It is possible that eating too much salt throughout life is one of the reasons why in developed countries people suffer from raised blood pressure. There is strong evidence that populations in developing countries have lower incidences of hypertension. This is probably due to their diets being lower in salt.

Salt is added to foods for various reasons;

- as a preservative,
- to influence the flavor,
- to improve the texture and to control yeast fermentation in breadmaking.

Salt (or table salt) is not the only source of sodium in our diet.

Guidelines recommend that adults should aim for a maximum of 6 g of salt per day. A recent report found that men are consuming an average of 11 g a day, while women eat 8.1 g a day.

Only 15 % of our salt intake comes from adding table salt to our food, 5 % occurs naturally in food and as much as 80% is hidden in the foods we buy. The top five culprits are as follows:

**1. Smoked, processed and cured meats**

Meats such as ham, bacon, corned beef; frankfurters, sausage and tongue may be high in salt

**2. Fish**

Pickled herring, anchovies, tuna and sardines all have a high salt content. Fresh and frozen fish always has a lower salt content. Tuna in spring water and in oil have a lower salt content than tuna in brine. Avoid smoked fish.

**3. Meat extracts and stocks**

Stocks are major ingredients in dishes such as soups, stews and risottos. A little stock cube contains a lot of salt. Many health food shops and supermarkets sell salt free or reduced salt stocks or vegetable powders and extracts. Be adventurous and make your own stocks or simply try to use more herbs and spices to flavour dishes.

#### **4. Savoury snacks**

The name says it all. Most crisps, including, vegetable, potato, tortilla and corn crisps as well as pretzels, salted nuts, popcorn and crackers are all salt bombs. A small packet of crisps would be about a third of a 6 year old's salt requirement for the day. Because these snacks are mostly eaten on top of three meals per day, their high salt content really does have an impact. Many savoury snacks can now be found in an unsalted version. Nuts are highly nutritious, but do make sure you choose the unsalted nuts. By popping your own popcorn at home, you have control over the salt content.

#### **5. Pickles**

Pickles such as gherkins, pickled onions, capers and artichokes are all preserved in a salt mixture. Rinse the pickles where possible to get rid of any excess salt water.

In the last few years the food industry has been trying hard to lower the salt content of processed and packaged food.

With new nutritional information such as the traffic light system and the Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA), most packaged foods clearly state in an easy visible way whether a product is high, medium or low in salt. Processed food though remains the biggest contributor to a high salt intake. A recent survey of sandwiches showed that one sandwich can contain more salt than seven packets of crisps and that 41% of the sandwiches surveyed contain more salt than a Big Mac.

Many of the foods listed above are also healthy foods and deserve to be on the menu of a healthy balanced diet. If you are eating a meal or food that has a high salt content though, it is important though that you try to balance it with foods that are low in salt. Be salt aware!

Next time you go shopping, compare the labels on different foods, to help you choose those that are lower in salt.

Most packaged food products carry a nutrition label that states the amount of sodium rather than salt. To work out the equivalent amount of salt, multiply the sodium value by 2.5.

Look at the figure for sodium or salt per 100g.

**High** is more than 1.5g salt per 100g (or 0.6g sodium)

**Low** is 0.3g salt or less per 100g (or 0.1g sodium)

If the amount of salt per 100g is in between these figures, then that is a medium level of salt.

Remember that the amount you eat of a particular food affects how much salt you will get from it.

Here are some top tips to reduce the salt in your diet:

- cut back on salt added in cooking and at the table. Eventually your taste buds will adapt;
- instead of salt, use pepper, herbs and spices, or try flavours such as lemon and lime;
- choose breakfast cereals with reduced salt levels;
- don't snack on salty snacks regularly;

- if you are craving something sweet, remember some biscuits and cakes have more salt added than you would expect;
- most dips have added salt, so why not have a go at making your own;
- always choose foods in which the salt content has been controlled, e.g. reduced salt baked beans and tuna canned in spring water and low salt stock cubes;
- choose sensibly when eating out; a baked potato with tuna and salad is much lower in salt than fast food such as a burger;
- **MAKE IT YOURSELF.** This is the hardest but the best way to ensure that you are not exceeding the recommended salt intake.