

Salt of The Earth

Most people love salt. Comfort foods (think macaroni and cheese, French fries, and apple pie!) often contain huge amounts of salt, fat, and sugar - and that's one of the reasons why people love them so much. And salt is critical to human health. Salt maintains the electrolyte balance inside and outside of cells, and it regulates the amount of fluid in the body.



But as much as we love it, and as important as it is, we all know that we should limit our sodium intake. For decades, doctors have told patients with hypertension (high blood pressure) that they need to reduce the sodium in their diets. Unfortunately, other than those at high risk for hypertension, most Westerners are not urged to consume a low-salt diet.

What's so bad about hypertension? In a nutshell, the higher your blood pressure, the harder your heart has to work to pump blood through your body, which means that your heart and arteries are much more susceptible to injury. High blood pressure increases risk of kidney failure, heart disease, stroke, eye damage, and fatty buildups in the arteries. Where am I going with this? Salt consumption is directly related to hypertension.

However, salt isn't all bad - our bodies need salt to regulate cellular function, and we would die if we had a diet with zero salt in it. But this doesn't mean we need run out and grab an extra large order of French Fries in the spirit of healthy cellular function! Luckily, fruits and vegetables contain as much salt as you'll ever need. That's right: there's salt in your oranges and broccoli, friends. And they carry infinitely greater health benefits than those salty and fried potato wedges.

In fact, unless you are involved in extremely strenuous physical activity, you probably need never worry about whether or not you're getting enough salt in your diet. And even serious athletes can get most of the salt that they need by eating a healthy, plant based diet, and drinking the occasional electrolyte-drink during strenuous competition.

Unfortunately though, salt is ubiquitous and almost impossible to get away from. It's in bread, soda pop, packaged foods, cheeses, condiments, canned goods, and restaurant foods. You will be shocked at just how much salt is in the foods you typically consider healthy. You can pick up a can of low sodium, organic black beans, and surprise! Too much sodium. As a general rule, I don't buy packaged foods where the mg of sodium per serving exceeds the calories per serving (The ratio should be less than 1 mg per 1 calorie or internationally, 0.001 gram per 1 Kcal). In fact, I try to buy as few packaged foods as possible and cook fresh whenever I can. Ultimately, we all need to be wary consumers and learn to read labels carefully.

One difficulty, however, is that salt isn't always called salt, or sodium. Other substantial sources of salt are: baking powder, baking soda, sodium citrate (in soda and some juices), sodium nitrite (in cured meats), sodium benzoate (as a preservative), and monosodium glutamate (MSG).

MSG is so prevalent and so appalling that it deserves a few additional words. When obese rats and mice are needed for diabetes studies or other health research, they're made fat by having MSG injected into them. The MSG triples the amount of insulin the pancreas creates, causing rats to become obese. They even have a title for these fat rodents: MSG-Treated Rats. MSG has also been linked to asthma, migraines, and heart irregularities.

And MSG is everywhere! It's in chips, crackers, cookies, condiments, salad dressings, powdered milk, some whey and soy proteins, frozen meals, and, of course, fast food. And it's not always called MSG. Other names for MSG are: Autolyzed Yeast, Hydrolyzed Vegetable Protein, Plant Protein Extract, and Textured Plant Protein. Also, ingredients on labels such as Natural Flavoring, Seasoning, and Spices may contain MSG as well.

A good place to start reducing the amount of salt in your diet is by beginning to eliminate all foods with MSG and high amounts of sodium for the next thirty days. The easiest way to do this is by looking at the labels on the foods you buy. You will find yourself quickly becoming a wise label-reader and in-turn, eating significantly lower amounts of processed foods.

If you're dreading the taste of bland, boring foods, don't worry - consider that beyond salt, there are hundreds of other spices that add wonderful flavor to foods and are perfectly healthy to consume. We have over 10,000 taste buds, yet unfortunately, there are only a handful of flavors that most of us usually encounter. Be adventurous and try some new spices!

One of the challenges we all face is that salt, sugar, and dietary fat do in-fact give our brains a larger satisfactory response than most other flavors. This is because in small amounts, they are essential; we need minerals from salt, and calories from sugar and fat, to survive. And at one time in our history, it was much harder to get salt, sugar, and dietary fat in our diets. Today though, our predilection for salt, sugar, and fat is easily over-satisfied, and is slowly killing us. Just because we crave and need a little salt, sugar, and fat doesn't mean we should eat as much of them as we do.

In fact, I've found that many of the people I talk with who say they are convinced they don't like the taste of fruits and vegetables is largely because they've relied on processed foods for so long that they've literally numbed their taste buds to the wonderful flavors that exist naturally in fruits and vegetables. If you're such a person, take heart - you especially will benefit from laying off of the salt for the next 30 days. Once your palate has readjusted, you'll discover that most whole food, plant-based (WFPB) meals are truly delicious.

So grab some cayenne - or garlic, or cumin, or basil, etc. And feel free to have a salt shaker on your table. I prefer to get my little bit of salt from sea-salt crystals in a salt-grinder. Just make sure that you use salt after your food is prepared, rather than adding salt during the preparation. If you're relying on fresh, whole, plant-based foods for the majority of your caloric intake, a bit of table salt or sea-salt won't hurt you.

Bon Appetit!