

**By Elizabeth George MD**

**What's the easiest way to reduce sodium (a/k/a salt) in your meals? Choose fresh foods! Fresh (or fresh frozen) fruits, vegetables, lean meat, poultry and fish contain very little sodium. Dried whole grains, beans and nuts also are naturally low in sodium. Creating your meals from these ingredients will provide a healthy low sodium diet.**

**What's sodium; what's salt? Sodium (Na) is a mineral that is essential to the electrolyte and fluid balance in our bodies; all cells (such as nerves and muscle) depend on it for functioning. Normal levels are a balance between intake and excretion by the kidneys and in perspiration.**

**Table salt is sodium chloride (NaCl). Sodium is also present in many other compounds that are added in processing food products as flavoring or as preservatives. Some of these added forms are monosodium glutamate, sodium nitrite, sodium saccharin, baking soda (sodium bicarbonate) and sodium benzoate.**

**Why should I reduce sodium intake? High sodium intake in the American diet is a major contributing factor to the high rate of hypertension in this country. Hypertension is a disease of industrialized societies. Studies of primitive populations where little sodium is consumed show almost no hypertension. In addition, provided a traditional diet is maintained, blood pressure does not increase with aging.**

**American Heart Association notes that the average American consumes about 3,400 mg of sodium daily. A healthy amount is considered to be less than 2,300 mg. In fact, many experts now agree that lowering daily consumption to no more than 1,500 mg of sodium daily would be an effective way to lower high blood pressure and prevent its onset. 1/4 tsp of salt has 590 mg of sodium – more than 30% of the recommended daily intake.**

**A fast food meal – with large burger, special sauce and medium fries – comes in at 1310 mg! Only 10 percent of sodium in our diets occurs naturally in foods. 15% comes from the use of salt in cooking or added at the table. Processed foods contribute the remaining 75%.**

**How do you know if you're getting too much salt in your diet? Next time you're eating a favorite meal, think about the flavor and see if you can really taste the flavor of the meat or vegetable, or are you just tasting salt? The human taste buds that identify salt were designed to help us get adequate minerals (including sodium) in our diet; however, now that salt is plentifully available, the same taste buds can get hooked on salty habits. It's time to cook with the idea of being able to taste the flavor of the food itself, or complement flavors with herbs or spices rather than salt; your taste buds will readjust to enjoying different flavors.**

**In addition to choosing fresh foods for cooking, you can also reduce sodium with the following tips:**

- **READ LABELS.** If you are going to use packaged, jarred and canned foods, read your labels carefully for the amount of sodium AND the portion size. Compare, for example, Lipton's Ragu spaghetti sauce with 756 mg of sodium to Classico Roasted Garlic which has only 220 mg.
- **SKIP PROCESSED MEATS.** These processed and salted meats include bologna, salami, bacon, sausage and hotdogs. For example, beef stick summer sausage contains 750mg sodium per 2 ounces.
- **WATCH THE Na IN CONDIMENTS.** Read the labels on salad dressings and other condiments. For example, note that adding a tablespoon of soy sauce adds 920 mg of sodium. For a salad, make your own salt free dressing with olive oil and vinegar.
- **CHOOSE UNSALTED SNACKS.** Skip the salted crackers, chips, popcorn and pretzels.
- **LIMIT FAST FOOD, AND CHOOSE WISELY.** Fast foods are often very high in salt, as are many restaurant foods. When eating out, try steamed fish and vegetables or fresh salads. Ask the waitress or chef which foods are seasoned without salt. "Shake your Salt Habit"!!

The American Heart Association is working with federal agencies to identify strategies to reduce the amount of sodium in the food supply and is encouraging food manufacturers and restaurants to reduce the amount of sodium in foods by 50 percent over a 10-year period.

What is the D.A.S.H Eating Plan? "D.A.S.H" stands for "Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension." This eating plan is based on a delicious and varied diet that's rich in vegetables and fruits, with whole grains, highfiber foods, lean meats and poultry, fish at least twice a week, and fat-free or 1 percent fat dairy. It has been found to not only reduce blood pressure but also reduce heart disease by 24% and stroke rates by 18%.

Go to the helpful web site [dashdiet.org](http://dashdiet.org) The American Heart Association Low Salt Cookbook is an easy to use guide to tasty, healthy recipes and is available at most bookstores.

Watch for next week's article by Deb Stepler on how to reduce salt in recipes and other ideas for preparing lowsodium meals.