



Behind the hype: **Salt**

Why is this an issue?

New Zealanders consume far more sodium from salt than the body needs. It is the sodium part of salt that is a risk for health. Diets high in sodium raise blood pressure, which increases the risk of heart disease and stroke.

The body uses sodium to:

- regulate water balance and body temperature
- maintain blood volume
- help muscles and nerves function.

Where does salt come from in food?



Foods that contribute the most salt to our diet are bread and processed meats (ham, bacon, sausages). Foods such as bread are a major source of sodium because they are eaten in relatively large amounts.

How much is too much?

The recommended upper level of intake is no more than 6 grams salt (2,300mg sodium) per day. This includes the amount 'hidden' in processed food and equates to about one teaspoon a day.

In a nutshell

- Too much sodium in the diet increases blood pressure, even in children.
- High blood pressure is a strong risk factor for heart disease and stroke.
- Most New Zealanders eat more sodium (as salt) than they need.
- About 75% of the sodium in the diet comes from commercially prepared food.
- Reduce sodium in your food by:
 - choosing fresh, unprocessed foods
 - choosing lower salt processed foods – check the labels
 - using less salt at the table and in cooking.
- If you use salt, choose iodised salt.
- Avoid adding salt to food for babies and toddlers.
- Offer children fresh unprocessed foods for meals and snacks, such as chopped fresh fruit and vegetables rather than salty processed snacks.

How do we eat less salt?

- Eat more vegetables and fruit, and less processed and ready-prepared foods.
- Choose lower salt foods by reading food labels. Salt is shown as sodium on the nutrition information panel.
- Look for 'no added salt', 'unsalted', and 'reduced salt' products.
- Use little or no salt in cooking and at the table – instead use herbs, spices, citrus fruit and vinegars for flavour.
- Make small reductions over time to let your taste buds adjust to less salt.

Types of salt

Table salt either comes from sea water or is mined from rock. Both types contain the same amount of sodium. Salt is sold in supermarkets in different sized crystals – fine granules, flakes and coarse larger crystals. Some forms of salt such as rock salt, or pink Himalayan salt, may be marketed as healthier versions. However, all of these forms of salt contain similar amounts of sodium and should only be used sparingly. Flavoured salt, such as herb salts, is simply salt with herbs added.

Salt and iodine

New Zealand soil is naturally low in iodine and consequently this makes fruit, vegetables and cereal foods grown in New Zealand iodine poor. Iodine has been added to salt since the 1920s to prevent goitre (enlarged thyroid gland).

If you are using salt at home, choose iodised salt. The salt used by food manufacturers is not usually iodised, which means most processed foods don't contain iodine (the exception is most breads, which are required to be fortified with iodised salt).

More information

Useful websites

- www.heartfoundation.org.nz
- www.stroke.org.nz/salt
- www.mpi.govt.nz/food-safety/food-safety-for-consumers/whats-in-our-food-2/nutrients/sodium/

References

- Ministry of Health (2008). Food & Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy Infants and Toddlers (aged 0-2) A background paper 4th edition – Partially Revised December 2012. Wellington: Ministry of Health.
- Ministry of Health (2012). Food & Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy Children and Young People (aged 2-18 years). Wellington: Ministry of Health.
- Heart Foundation (2010). Reducing our sodium footprint: HeartSafe situation analysis. Accessed December 15, 2014 from www.heartfoundation.org.nz/programmes-resources/food-industry-and-hospitality/heartsafe.
- NHMRC (2006). Nutrient Reference Values for Australia and New Zealand Including Recommended Dietary Intakes. Canberra: National Health and Medical Research Council; Wellington: Ministry of Health.



Free nutrition and physical activity resources are available from:

www.nutritionandactivity.govt.nz