

National Call For Sodium Reduction - What Does This Mean For You?

First there was Fat-free, then there was the No Carb craze. Now the hot topic is SODIUM, but is throwing away your salt shaker the answer?

There seems to be a lot of fear surrounding the use of salt but how much do you really know about sodium chloride? Although the words salt and sodium are often used interchangeably, they are not the same. Sodium is a mineral that combines with chlorine to form salt. Foods such as fish, eggs, nuts, crab, lobster and seaweed are naturally high in sodium. Other naturally occurring sources of sodium, although not quite as high, are carrots, celery, cauliflower, pineapples and cow's milk.

When talking about salt, we now have two distinct choices: refined or unrefined.

Table salt is a man-made creation of the last century, mined from underground salt deposits. It is composed of 98% sodium chloride with the remainder made up of additives, bleaching and anti-caking agents to prevent clumping, stabilizers, aluminum compounds and typically a small amount of dextrose (sugar). In addition, potassium iodide, an inorganic form of iodine not easily assimilated by the body, is often added to table salt. Refined salt is processed at high temperatures, removing the beneficial trace minerals.

Sea salt, however, is made through the evaporation of sea water. It is less refined than table salt and contains additional trace minerals found in the sea, giving it a slightly different taste. Refined salt possesses very fine, white crystals and a sharp, often metallic taste. Whole, unrefined sea salt is light grey or pink in colour. Because it is hand harvested and dried naturally by the sun and air, it retains a moister texture. Unprocessed salt contains more than 80 essential minerals and trace elements.

So why include salt in our diets at all? Isn't it harmful to our health?

Doctors are concerned about salt in the diet and its correlation to high blood pressure and heart disease; however, some individuals have greater blood pressure responses to salt than others. A healthy kidney can dispose of excess sodium, but in many cases that happens at the expense of losing calcium. For women, an excess amount of sodium in the diet and the continuous loss of calcium it facilitates may eventually be linked to osteoporosis.

One fact no one challenges is that the human body needs sodium to function. Sodium is the main component of the body's extracellular fluids and it helps carry nutrients into the cells. Sodium also helps regulate body functions, such as blood pressure and fluid volume. From a health perspective, sodium is a necessary part of our diets. From a culinary point of view, salt brings out the flavour in our food, particularly when using it during the cooking process as opposed to at your plate.

Completely eliminating salt from your diet is not the answer! Follow the steps below for a more reasonable approach to reducing your sodium intake:

Read labels and be conscious of sodium in packaged foods

The average Canadian consumes at least 3,100 milligrams of sodium each day, most of it hidden in processed foods. Health Canada says the appropriate intake of sodium for an adult is 1,200 to 1,500 milligrams daily, with an upper limit of 2,300 for good health.

Minimize consumption of fast foods

When it comes to sodium, most fast foods are off the charts. For example, McDonald's Big Mac contains 1100 mg. of sodium, Subway 6" tuna sub contains 1180 mg. of sodium, Taco Bell taco salad with salsa contains 2250 mg. of sodium and Pizza Hut 6" personal pan pizza contains 2450 mg. of sodium!

Use unrefined sea salt instead of refined table salt

Unrefined sea salt supplies vital trace minerals, promoting optimum biological function and cellular maintenance. It stimulates salivation and helps to balance and replenish all of the body's electrolytes.

Unprocessed sea salt often contains 1/3 less sodium than an equal amount of table salt.

Take note that much of the salt labelled "sea salt" is actually refined table salt - remember: all salt originates from the sea! Sea salt, if it's white and free-flowing, has been highly refined and is lacking in essential minerals and trace elements. Look for unprocessed sea salt with a bit of a grey or pinkish colour. This is the form of salt the body recognizes and is designed to use. Unrefined salt can come from two sources: either freshly dried from the sea, as in Celtic Sea Salt or Nature's Cargo brand, or mined from ancient inland ocean beds as in Himalayan Salt. These products are available in most health food stores.

Enjoy salt in moderation

Many people add salt to their food before even tasting it. As your intake of sodium increases, you often become desensitized to it causing the amount of salt you require to satisfy your taste to gradually rise. You may not even realize how salty your food is. So don't say goodbye to your salt shaker, just shake in moderation!