# Is salt bad for your health?

Salt has the amazing ability to enhance the taste of food and truly deserves a place on the kitchen shelf. Unfortunately, this tempts many people to overdo it, leading to dangerously high salt intakes, which could eventually cause serious diseases.

Salt isn't unhealthy unless you eat too much of it.

Here's the deal:

Salt and sodium aren't the same things. Salt is composed of two minerals – about 40% sodium and 60% chloride. Sodium is what can negatively affect your health if you consume too much. But your body also needs sodium to survive. In small amounts, it helps your nerves and muscles function properly and balances fluid in your body.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends salt intake should be limited to no more than 5g (one teaspoon) per person, per day. Too low salt intake in turn could lead to low blood pressure and electrolyte imbalances in your blood.
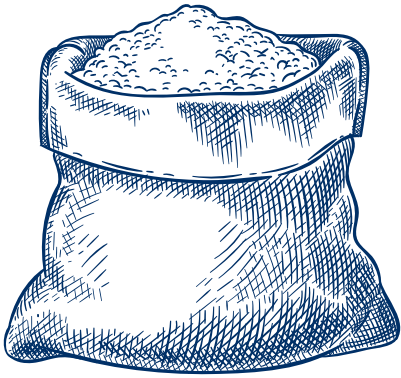
Signs of too little sodium include:

- Dizziness
- Headache
- Lack of energy
- Muscle fatigue
- Nausea

Effects of eating too much salt:

A sodium-heavy diet makes you retain fluid, which leads to swelling in the short term. But far more concerning is its impact on your body over time. Excess sodium intake can negatively affect your kidney function. It also leads to high blood pressure, the top risk factor for stroke.

Signs your sodium intake is TOO HIGH

It's important to know how sodium affects you, as everyone is different. After eating a salty meal, look for the following signs to see if you're more sensitive to sodium's effects:

• Bloating

Sodium attracts water. If you eat a lot of salty foods, you'll experience fluid retention (when sodium (holds) water in your body). The result? You feel swollen and look puffier, especially around the abdomen and eyes. You may also notice swelling in your hands and feet.

• Rise in blood pressure

Sodium is primarily located in your blood, and it pulls water to it, so if you eat too much sodium, more water enters your bloodstream. The greater volume of blood pushes against blood vessel walls, causing high blood pressure (hypertension).

• Poor sleep quality

Eating too much sodium can mess with your sleep, especially if you eat it in the evening. A spike in blood pressure, along with urges to drink and frequent visits to the bathroom, makes staying asleep difficult.

Steps to help reduce your daily salt intake

Choose whole, unprocessed foods and eat plenty of vegetables and fruit

Base your diet on whole, minimally-processed foods with plenty of vegetables and fruit. These foods are generally lower in salt than processed foods. The more processing – the more likely salt has been added along the way.

Check food labels before you buy to help you choose less salty options

Use this practical table to know the ideal value of each nutrient in different foods.

Nutrient Per 100g of food	Fat	Saturated fat	Sugar	Salt (Sodium)
low eat more often	<3g	<1,5g	<5g	<120g
medium eat seldom	3-20g	1,5-5g	5-15g	120-600mg
high avoid	>20g	>5g	>15g	>600g

< stands for less than
> stands for more than

When you start comparing products, it's surprising to see how the level of sodium can vary so much between similar products. To keep it simple when looking on a food label – less is best! Choose products which have the least amount of sodium per 100g.

Compare foods that are high in salt (like processed meats and sauces) but also compare the packaged foods that you eat often (like bread and breakfast cereals). Although these foods contain moderate amounts of sodium, they can contribute a lot of salt to our diets which can add up quickly (i.e. eating several slices of bread per day).

Take salt, (salt containing spices) and salty sauces off the table so younger family members won't develop the habit of adding salt

Tomato sauce, mustard, barbeque sauce, chutneys and soy sauces all contain considerable amounts of salt. The reality is, most of us have probably eaten more salt than recommended through packaged foods before we even pick up a saltshaker or drown our meal in tomato sauce.

Tastes and eating habits are formed early by children. If a child is exposed to salty foods when they are young, it is more likely that they will have a preference for salty foods when they are adults. If your family regularly uses table salt and salty sauces, removing them from the table will help to reduce your reliance on using sauces to add flavour to meals.

Use herbs, (natural) spices, garlic and citrus in place of salt to add flavour to your food during cooking and at the table

Although most of the salt we eat comes from processed and packaged food, you can easily add plenty of flavour to your meals by using herbs, spices and citrus (lemon or lime zest), dressings and vinegar in place of salt. Remember ingredients like stock and soy sauce all contain hidden salt so go easy on them and choose lower/ reduced salt versions if they are available. Gradually add less salt to your favourite recipes - your taste buds will adapt over time.

Cut back on processed meats, smoked foods and salty take-aways

Another simple way to reduce our salt intake is to cut back on salty foods and choose more whole, minimally processed foods. Processed meats like ham, bacon, sausages, canned corned beef, smoked chicken and smoked fish are all high in salt. Consider alternating processed and smoked meats with sandwich fillings like chicken, fish, egg and hummus to cut down on salt.

Take-aways cost a lot more than home cooked meals and they usually contain more salt. As an alternative, try making similar meals at home. If you eat takeaways one day a week, watch your salt intake for the rest of that week.

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