Sodium overload: shaking the salt habit

Many of us may think our diets are low in sodium. You might already avoid salty snacks, use very little salt in cooking, keep the shaker off the table and dislike food that tastes too salty. But salt can sneak up in some unexpected places, like everyday grain foods and dairy products. In fact, on average three quarters of your sodium comes from pre-made, processed or packaged foods.



Your body needs sodium for muscle and nerve function but it doesn't take much to meet your needs. The average Canadian adult consumes 3,500 mg of sodium per day, which is *over twice the recommended level* for good health. Too much sodium can lead to high blood pressure and can put you at risk for heart and kidney disease, as well as stroke. Shake the salt habit and reduce the amount of sodium in your diet by:

Going fresh. The best way to cut down on salt is to prepare home-cooked meals full of fruits and vegetables. Avoid convenient canned, processed and frozen food, and instead buy the ingredients to make homemade soups, sauces and casseroles. Purchase fresh meats when possible and speak to your butcher about the best cut before buying.

Reading the fine print. Life can get pretty busy and ensuring all your meals and snacks are always home-cooked is unrealistic. It's time to up your label literacy: if you're buying pre-packaged foods, take a good look at the labels and scan the sodium content. Avoid food with more than 200 mg of sodium per serving. If available, choose low-sodium versions of your favourite foods but be weary of the label "reduced sodium." In many cases it means that the salt level is cut back by just 25 percent—which makes little difference in products with soaring sodium levels.

Giving it time. If you're a slave to salt and can't eat a meal without it, aim to cut back gradually. Remove the shaker from the table and slowly reduce the amount of salt in your cooking to give your taste buds time to adjust. You won't miss it and you'll even start to prefer meals with less salt. This will allow you to enjoy the taste of food on its own with all the healthy benefits.

Considering alternatives. Ditch the salt for healthier, salt-free seasonings that will enhance the natural flavour of your food while adding some zest. Try herbs, vinegar, olive oil, citrus zest, fruit juices, curry and other spices. Avoid salt-laden condiments as these can skyrocket your sodium levels. Consider creating your own low-sodium versions with the added bonus of being preservative free!

Limiting dining out dangers. The amount of sodium found in restaurant food can be alarming, but you shouldn't have to avoid eating out completely to cut back on salt. Choose dishes that are baked, broiled, poached, roasted or grilled rather than marinated, pickled, smoked or breaded—all of which scream "high sodium!" Don't be afraid to ask your server to make your meal without added salt and look at the nutritional information if it's available. Also request an "undressed" meal with sauces served on the side. That way you can control how much of the high-fat, high-salt toppings you add to your meal.

While, you can control the amount of salt you shake on your food, it's the "sneaky" salt that can cause major setbacks in your healthy lifestyle. To protect yourself from hidden sodium, step back, consider the unexpected sources in the processed and pre-packaged food you eat and get in the habit of reading nutritional labels. And always remember: when it comes to salt, less is more!