Protect Your Heart:
Shake Sneaky Salt
Out of Your Diet

Salt is a sneaky seasoning.

You probably know that it contributes to high blood pressure, which can cause heart disease and stroke. Maybe you’ve struck a blow for health and banished the salt shaker from your kitchen table.

If so, good for you! But don’t stop there. Salt shows up in lots of foods we eat every day, even if we never pick up the salt shaker.

In fact, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently reported that 44 percent of the salt in Americans’ diet comes from just 10 common foods. Knowing which ones they are can help you consume less salt and better protect your heart.

Too Much of a Good Thing

Table salt is sodium chloride, and sodium is a mineral that’s essential for life. It helps control your body’s fluid balance, helps send nerve impulses, and affects how your muscles work. You need some sodium in your diet.

But studies show that the average American consumes more than twice as much sodium as necessary: a whopping 3,400 milligrams (mgs) a day. Sodium intake is higher among men than women and highest among people 20 to 50 years old.

Just one teaspoon of salt contains about 2,300 mgs of sodium. That’s the maximum daily amount recommended by the American Heart Association (AHA). Ideally, we should strive to eat no more than 1,500 mgs.

Too much sodium in your system prompts your body to retain water. This puts an extra burden on your heart and blood vessels and may raise blood pressure, with painful consequences.

If all of us reduced our sodium intake by 40 percent, the CDC estimates that we could save close to 280,000 lives over the next 10 years.

Where’s the Salt?
The CDC study found that 61 percent of the salt we consume each day comes from packaged, processed, and restaurant foods. Restaurant meals were the saltiest.

Among the foods the study targeted, some weren’t necessarily high in salt, but we eat so much of them that they quickly add to our salt total.

Here, in order, are the top 10 foods that were found to pack the most salt into our diet:

1. Yeast breads (including rolls, buns, bagels, and English muffins)
2. Pizza
3. Sandwiches (including hot dogs, hamburgers, and breakfast sandwiches)
4. Cold cuts and cured meats
5. Soups
6. Burritos and tacos
7. Savory snacks (like chips, popcorn, pretzels, and crackers)
8. Chicken
9. Cheese (natural and processed)
10. Eggs and omelets

While this list is useful to know, it doesn’t mean you have to avoid all these foods. Instead, limit how much of them you eat and read food labels to choose options with the least salt.

**Shaking Out the Salt**

Here are some more tips to help stamp salt out of your diet:

- Avoid adding table salt to foods. If you haven’t banished the salt shaker already, now’s the time!
- Instead, flavor your foods with herbs, spices, onions, garlic, and vinegar.
- Look for condiments that have reduced sodium.
- Choose unsalted nuts and low-sodium canned foods.
- Drain and rinse canned vegetables, beans, and shellfish before using. This can wash away up to 40 percent of the sodium.
- Cook pasta, rice, and cereal without salt.
- Eat smaller portions, especially of the foods listed above.
- Be discriminating when you eat in restaurants. Ask that your dish be prepared without salt. Avoid dishes with these words in their names: au jus, brined, barbecued, broth, cured, miso, pickled, smoked, soy sauce, teriyaki sauce.
- Limit your use of sea salt, kosher salt, baking soda, baking powder, and monosodium glutamate (MSG). These also contain lots of sodium.
- Look for low-salt and no-salt recipes. You can start at the AHA website: https://recipes.heart.org/
You can counter some of the effects of sodium and potentially lower your blood pressure by eating foods rich in potassium. These include sweet potatoes, greens, tomatoes, white beans, kidney beans, nonfat yogurt, oranges, bananas and cantaloupe.

Over time, your taste buds can adjust to eating less salt. Studies have shown that when people are on a lower-sodium diet for a while, they begin to prefer lower-sodium foods. Stuff they used to enjoy tastes way too salty!

For more information about “breaking up with sodium,” visit the American Heart Association website: https://sodiumbreakup.heart.org/

For more information about high blood pressure, visit the CDC website: www.cdc.gov/bloodpressure/