When it comes to salt (also known as sodium) in your diet, less is certainly best. Sodium can be found in all foods, including those that do not taste salty. Americans consume, on average, 3,466 milligrams (mg) of sodium daily. Recommended levels for young, healthy people are less than 2,400 mg per day. Doctors recommend that older adults and African Americans consume less than 1,400 mg of sodium per day because of their increased risk for high blood pressure.
High sodium intake can lead to high blood pressure. The body only needs a very slight amount of sodium to survive. When there’s extra sodium in the blood stream, water is pulled into the blood vessels, increasing volume. When there is more blood flowing through the body, blood pressure spikes. Over time, high blood pressure will injure blood vessel walls and increase plaque buildup from blocked blood flow. This pressure will also wear out the heart, leading to or worsening cardiovascular disease.

A low-sodium diet provides many benefits when it comes to heart health. Reducing sodium may lower blood pressure and enhance the response to blood pressure medications.

The majority of the sodium in our diets comes from packaged and restaurant foods. So how can we reduce it?

When possible, eat fresh. Fresh fruits and vegetables are your healthiest options for a low-sodium diet. Choose fresh cuts of beef, poultry, fish or pork that contain natural amounts of sodium, as opposed to the extra sodium added during processing in products like bacon or ham. Remember that salt is added to food as a preservative. If a food product can be preserved in the refrigerator for long periods of time, it’s a clue that the sodium content in the product is too high. If you do choose a canned item, rinse the product before cooking to wash off the excess salt. Be cautious of pre-marinated meats and seasoning packets that can increase your sodium intake.

Read labels. When available, buy products marked as “low sodium” or “reduced sodium.” Sodium content is required to be in product nutrition information. Foods that are often high in sugar can also have high sodium content, so it’s important to read the label. Beware of foods that do not particularly taste salty, but have high sodium content (i.e., cottage cheese, apple pie filling). When buying frozen vegetables, choose those that are labeled “fresh frozen.” Be sure the product does not contain added seasoning or sauces. Sodium content of any product can also vary from brand to brand, so it’s best to seek out every option.

Do it yourself. Cook from scratch to see exactly what is going into a meal. A serving of a premade meal such as a rotisserie chicken or a frozen pizza can have more than an entire daily value of sodium. The same goes for canned soup, beans and sauces.

Make simple swaps. Choose garlic powder instead of garlic salt. Replace bottled salad dressing with homemade vinaigrette. Use spices and herbs to flavor a meal instead of salt. (Salt-free seasoning is also an option.) Roast or grill food for a different flavor instead of adding a salty seasoning. Avoid instant pasta or rice, and limit sauces and mixes.

Dine out better. When dining out, search for the best low-sodium option. Research a restaurant before arriving. Ask the server about low-sodium options, or request for your meal to be prepared without salt.

Beverages: Be aware of sports drinks, canned vegetable and fruit juices, sodas and beer, all which can be high in sodium. When possible, drink fresh juices to reduce your sodium intake.

Salt preference is an acquired taste that can be difficult to break. It takes about 6-8 weeks to get used to eating food with less salt. Once the body is accustomed to a low-sodium diet, it will become a preference.

If you have questions or concerns about your sodium intake, contact your healthcare provider.