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Does your diet include too much sodium?

Do you add salt to your food before you take a bite?

Are salty foods more appealing to you than unsalted foods?

Do you salt food when you are cooking?

The following article will help you understand why salt can be harmful to your health.

What is Sodium?

Sodium is a necessary nutrient and is often referred to as salt.

According to the Merriam–Webster dictionary, the definition of salt is: “a crystalline compound NaCl that consists of sodium chloride, is abundant in nature, and is used to season or preserve food — called also common salt.” Sodium can be found in most homes, on dinner tables and in restaurants.

The body needs a small amount of sodium everyday to help with nerve and muscle activity.

The kidneys also require sodium to regulate fluid levels in the body.

If you eat too much sodium, sodium levels build up in your body and can cause high blood pressure (hypertension).

Hypertension can then lead to a variety of chronic illnesses, such as: stroke, heart attack, kidney damage, vision loss and congestive heart failure.

According to the American Heart Association, adults should eat less than 2,300 milligrams or 1 tsp. of salt daily.

Reading the nutrition labels on foods is important to understand how much salt you are consuming.

All nutrition labels will have the amount of salt written in milligrams (mg).

Processed foods such as fast food, meats and canned soups are very high in sodium.

Many fast food restaurants have a nutrition fact sheet behind the counter, or in many cases you can find it on the internet.

For processed meats and canned soups it is very important to read the label and choose products labeled “Low Sodium” or “Reduced Sodium”.

Start reading your food labels; you might be surprised how much salt you are actually consuming!

Alternatives to Sodium

There are a variety of ways to reduce sodium in your diet. One simple way is to buy fresh vegetables, frozen vegetables or canned vegetables with no sodium added.

Go for products that say, “No Salt Added” or “Sodium Free”.

Remove the salt shaker from your dinner table!

Taste your food first before adding any salt, it might not need any!

Salt is an acquired taste, by using less over time, you will retrain your taste buds and won’t need the shaker anymore.

Eating out can be challenging when watching your sodium intake. In most restaurants, the amount of sodium in your meal is unknown.

Don’t be afraid to ask the waiter or waitress for a low salt version of the meal.

Creating your own herb, salt-free alternative can make foods taste even better. Consider using bay leaves, cinnamon, onion, cloves, rosemary, ginger, paprika or pepper.

Recipe for Alternative Salt

Take a trip to the grocery store or step outside to your herb garden and

gather these fresh herbs: sage, thyme, oregano and rosemary.

If you gathered these herbs in your garden, make sure they are finely chopped. In a small bowl combine equal portions of each the herbs.

Mix them together. Spoon the herbs into an empty herb shaker or airtight container.

If the herbs are fresh it is recommended that you freeze the mixture to preserve the flavor.

This mixture tastes great on entrees, salads and soups.

Try coming up with your own versions of herb shakers as a salt alternative!

As harmless as salt seems, it may cause serious health problems in the future such as high blood pressure.

If you have high blood pressure, reducing sodium intake can help with management.

If you do not have high blood pressure it is a good time to start with preventative measures such as healthy eating and exercise.

Be sure to consult your doctor before starting any new exercise or eating plan.

Remember, sodium is necessary for our bodies to function, but too much sodium can be costly.

It is never too late to start lowering your sodium intake to prevent ilness which can help you live to a “Healthier Tomorrow.”

This column was written by Marisa Hartman, Senior Nursing Student at the School of Nursing at the University of Pittsburgh. For more information on this article, please call 412-624-3217. CHA is a part of the Department of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. It is one of 33 Prevention Research Centers in the United States funded by the Centers for Disease Control. For questions or more information contact David J. Fetterman, Community Outreach Coordinator at the Center for Healthy Aging at 412-383-3121 or visit www.healthyaging.pitt.edu .