

Get smart with salt

Most experts agree that too much salt is bad for us – but why? How much is too much? And how can you cut down and still enjoy great tasting food?

How does salt affect the heart?

Salt is made up of sodium and chloride; it's the sodium part which is associated with health problems. Eating too much sodium raises your blood pressure, which in turn increases the risk of heart disease and stroke.

Because we have a temperate climate our bodies only need a very small amount of salt, around 1g per day. However many adults are having between 7 and 9g per day of salt each day and most of us (adults and children) exceed the recommendations overleaf.

Some individuals are more sensitive and show evidence of increased blood pressure at lower intakes of salt. However for most of us the guidelines suggest no more than 6g of salt a day; that's about a teaspoon. The recommendations for children are even lower.

So where does all our salt come from? Two thirds of it comes from the salt present in manufactured foods. The rest is what we add ourselves, in cooking or at the table and some is naturally present in food.

How to eat less salt

- Use less in cooking
- Try to get out of the habit of routinely adding salt to your food. Taste food before you add salt to it
- Cut down on salty snacks such as crisps, Bombay mix, salted nuts and other salty snacks
- When buying canned vegetables opt for those without added salt
- Buy canned fish in spring water, tomato sauce or heart healthy oils
- When buying soups, sauces and ready meals look for ones that are lower in salt
- Avoid stock cubes and gravy mix, try making your own stock or buy low salt stock cubes
- Remember sea salt, garlic salt and black salt are all high in salt. So use sparingly.

Understanding Labels

On the front of some food packs there may be some “at a glance” labeling information. In most cases this will show the salt content as a percentage of your *Reference Intake (RI), and be colour-coded to show whether the food is low, medium or high in salt. Red means the food is high in salt and green means it is low in salt.

	Nutritional Information	Colour coding	Dietary Reference Intake (RI)
High salt	More than 1.5g salt per 100g (or 0.6g sodium)	Red	More than 25% of RI
Medium salt	Between 0.3g and 1.5g salt per 100g (0.1g to 0.6g sodium)	Amber	Between 5 and 25% of your RI
Low salt	Low is 0.3g salt or less per 100g (or 0.1g sodium)	Green	5% RI or less

*The reference intake is a measure of how much of a nutrient we need or should not exceed. In the case of salt the reference intake is 6g and indicates the maximum amount of salt we should consume as adults. It is not a target.

How to spice up your food

- Use spices and herbs to add flavour to your food instead of salt
- Toast seeds, nuts and spices to bring out their whole flavour
- Use mustard to spice up recipes and salad dressings or use as a condiment
- Add fresh chilli, ginger and garlic to provide a bite to your dishes
- Use canned tomatoes and tomato puree as a basis for casseroles, sauces and soups
- Marinate fish or meat in advance to give them more flavour
- Use the juice from lemons or limes to squeeze on fish and shellfish

How much salt should children have?

Because children are smaller than adults they should have even less salt. The daily recommended maximums for children are set out below and depend on their age:

- 1 to 3 years – no more than 2g salt a day (0.8g sodium)
- 4 to 6 years – no more than 3g salt a day (1.2g sodium)
- 7 to 10 years – no more than 5g salt a day (2g sodium)
- 11 and over and adults – no more than 6g salt a day (2.4g sodium)

If children have too much salt, this could affect their health now and in the future. And it could also give them a taste for salty food, which means they're more likely to continue eating too much salt when they grow up.

For more information on salt and health, log on to the NHS choice website:

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/salt.aspx