Slayer of the Sodium

Salt, a mineral compound consisting of sodium and chloride, is one of the world’s oldest food seasonings and preservatives. Though essential for animal life in small amounts, sodium can be harmful in large quantities. The high sodium intake by most Americans is due to more meals away from home and the increased use of convenience foods like canned foods, processed meats and cheeses, and frozen meals. High sodium intake is strongly associated with hypertension, heart disease, stroke, kidney failure and blindness. According to International Food Technology Journal (2010), the average sodium intake exceeds 3,400 milligrams per day (mg/day) which is well over the 2005 Dietary Guidelines recommendation of 2,300 mg/day (equal to about one teaspoon of salt per day). Persons who consume 1500 mg of sodium per day have better blood pressure control by keeping blood pressure from rising and allowing blood pressure medications to work more effectively.

So what’s the big idea? How can such a small compound cause such problems? The bottom line is fluid. Wherever sodium goes into the body, so does water. The more sodium eaten, the more water held by our body. This increases blood volume and blood pressure because more stress on the heart and blood vessels causes them to work harder. The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute states a blood pressure less than 120/80 millimeters of mercury (mmHg) to be desirable. A blood pressure of 140/90 mmHg or greater is considered hypertension. People with hypertension may benefit from reducing their sodium intake to 1500 mg sodium per day.

Now for the good news; we can be in control of our sodium intake! At first glance, it can seem sodium is hidden in many foods. The first step in reducing sodium intake is to know where to find it. Remember the foods on the go and highly processed foods. Luckily, the amount of sodium in a food is written on the food label. The food label gives us the information we need to make healthful food choices to reduce our daily sodium intake. Look at the Nutrition Facts and also at the Ingredients Listing for all sources that say sodium.
Here are some additional hints to reduce sodium intake:

1. **Use reduced sodium or no salt added products.** Canned goods, processed meats and cheeses, and frozen meals often come in reduced sodium varieties.

2. **Remove the salt shaker from the table.** Much of our sodium intake comes from the salt we add at the table after the food is prepared. Do you find yourself salting your food before you even taste it? You can reduce your sodium intake by not adding salt after the food is cooked. Reduce the amount of added salt gradually. Your taste buds will adapt to the salt reduction and before long you won’t even miss it!

3. **Use salt substitutes.** Before using, ask your physician if salt substitutes are right for you. Because they contain other chemicals which may interfere with your body or medications, always check with your physician first.

4. **Use spices.** To avoid flavorless food due to reduced sodium, use additional spices or hot sauces. Chose spices without salt like garlic powder instead of garlic salt. Read the ingredient list to be sure of salt content.

5. **Reduce salt in recipes by half.** Many recipes can handle a cut in salt and still be delicious. Do not cut salt when making yeast breads or rolls.

6. **Avoid food ingredients that contain sodium.** In addition to table salt, many ingredients add sodium to foods such as monosodium glutamate and sodium aluminum phosphate.

7. **When eating out ask for low sodium options or no added salt.** Many restaurants will mark foods as heart healthy. Often times the nutrition facts are available to the consumer. Remain in control of your food choices and consumption when eating out.

Remember you are in control of your food intake. Equip yourself with these tools to become the slayer of salt reducing the amount of sodium in your diet. Though cutting salt may seem like a daunting task, your heart will thank you! To learn more about reducing sodium in your diet, contact your local County Extension Agent at [insert contact information here].

References:

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