**Sodium and Potassium: Leading the Way to a Healthier Heart**

Do you salt your food before you taste? Should Americans cut back on salt? Sodium is important in maintaining proper fluid balance, regulating blood pressure, transmitting nerve impulses, and relaxation of muscles. But, too much sodium can be dangerous to our bodies and lead to heart disease, stroke, and/or kidney disease. With majority of sodium coming from processed, packaged foods, and restaurant foods, Americans on average get over 3,400 milligrams (mg) of sodium per day. The adequate intake (AI) of sodium for individual’s ages 9 to 50 years is 1,500 mg per day. Lower sodium AI’s were established for children and older adults (ages 1 to 3 years: 1,000 mg/day; ages 4 to 8 years: 1,200 mg/day; ages 51 to 70 years: 1,300 mg/day; ages 71 years and older: 1,200 mg/day) because their calorie requirements are lower. The Tolerable Upper Intake Level (UL) for sodium is 2,300 mg per day. Too much sodium leads to risks with the main risk being high blood pressure. To prevent risks from occurring, a UL is established to pose no risk to an individual. Ways to decrease sodium in the diet include the following:

- Avoid adding salt to foods.
- Limit canned, processed, and packages foods.
- Limit the amount of restaurant visits, but if needed ask them to avoid adding salt to your food.
- Season foods with herbs and spices that are salt-free.

Potassium maintains fluid balance and nerve transmission. Potassium does the opposite of sodium by lowering blood pressure by stopping the action of sodium. The Adequate Intake (AI) for potassium for adults is 4,700 mg per day. Individuals should consult with a health care provider for recommended levels if they have kidney disease or are taking certain medications,
such as ACE inhibitors. Sources of potassium include bananas, orange juice, most fruits, potatoes, dried peas, peanuts, nuts, dairy products, and meats.

With sodium and potassium working hand in hand, it is essential to regulate the two of them to allow for normal blood pressure. Unregulated blood pressure can lead to heart disease and stroke, which is the first and third leading cause of death in the United States.

References
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; www.cdc.gov/obesity
Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010; www.dietaryguidelines.gov

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