

Health for the Whole Family

October 2010

A-SALT-ed: How to Stop Salt from Dominating Your Diet

We hear a lot about low carb, low sugar, low fat and organic foods, but what about low salt? Unfortunately, the saltshaker has avoided the popular press, but it has not escaped the emergency rooms of America.

“Salt intake is extremely important when it comes to your health,” explains our consulting physician, an osteopathic physician. “Composed of sodium and chloride, your body needs salt to function properly; however, when you ingest too much sodium, your kidney becomes unable to eliminate it and the sodium then accumulates in the blood.”

Doctors explains that, when this happens, the heart must work harder to pump blood throughout the body, which increases the risk of high blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes.

The dangers associated with high salt intake are real for many people. According to doctors, the vast majority of Americans are getting far too much salt in their diets.

So, how much salt is too much?

The American Heart Association recommends a daily sodium intake of no more than 2,300 milligrams.

“The average American takes in 4,000 to 6,000 milligrams of sodium per day, more than double, sometimes triple, these recommendations,” says the consulting doctor. “To put this into perspective, that is like adding two to three teaspoons of salt to your plate every day and eating it all” .

How can I avoid foods high in salt when cooking at home?

“The first step is to know the foods in your home,” says our doctor.

Doctors advise consumers to read food labels in search for salt ingredients, such as:

- monosodium glutamate (MSG)
- baking soda (sodium bicarbonate)
- baking powder
- disodium phosphate (found in some quick-cooking cereals)
- sodium alginate (often used in ice cream)
- sodium nitrate (used in cured meats)
- sodium benzoate (used as a preservative in many sauces and salad dressings)
- sodium propionate
- and others

“These ingredients are often found in processed and prepared meals,” says our doctor. “If you minimize your consumption of these types of foods, you will eliminate a lot of excess sodium.”

Our doctor’s other tips for minimizing sodium intake at home include:

- Selecting fresh, frozen or canned food items without added salt.
- Cooking with herbs and spices to enhance flavor instead of salt.
- Limiting salty snacks, like chips and pretzels.
- Adding fresh lemon in place of salt to fish and vegetables.
- Selecting low-sodium, unsalted broths or soups and low-fat or non-fat dairy products.

How can I avoid consuming too much salt when eating out?

“For starters, you can choose to eat at places that prepare meals in a healthier but still tasty way. Continuously ask for no-salt-added food preparation wherever you eat.”

Our doctor also recommends minimizing the number of meals you eat from fast food restaurants, where most food is fried or where they use prepared ingredients high in salt.

“Sometimes, a single meal from these types of restaurants can pack an un-needed salty wallop of 2,000 milligrams or more,” says the physician. “If you do go to these places, state “no added salt” when you place your order. If they cannot accommodate, drive to another establishment.”

To help you in your food selections, almost all major fast food chains post nutritional information on their websites or will provide it upon request.

“It is ultimately up to you to know which salty foods to avoid, so take advantage of the available resources and get the facts before you order,” concludes the doctor.

For further information on avoiding salt and eating healthy, speak with your primary care physician or a registered dietitian.

Preventive medicine is just one aspect of care osteopathic physicians (DOs) provide. DOs are fully licensed to prescribe medicine and practice in all specialty areas, including surgery. DOs are trained to consider the health of the whole person and use their hands to help diagnose and treat their patients.