Salt

This Food Fact Sheet looks at salt in our diet. It covers how to find foods that are too high in salt and gives tips on how to reduce the amount of salt that you eat.

Salt and health

Many cells make up our body tissues. They have different shapes, sizes, and functions. All of these cells need enough salt to work properly.

Salt is vital for two reasons:

1. It helps transport water around the body and
2. It helps send messages between the brain and the body.

However, as with most things, too much salt can cause problems. Too much salt can cause water retention, high blood pressure, and a higher risk of heart attack, kidney disease and stroke. So, it is best to keep the amount of salt that we eat to safe limits.

Salt and everyday foods

Many everyday foods do not taste salty, but they can contain high amounts of 'hidden salt'. We also might add salt to our food when cooking or just before eating.

Around 75% of the salt we eat is already in the food we buy. Most of this comes from salt added to processed foods. These include snacks like crisps and biscuits, ready meals, soups and pasta sauces. Even breads and cereals can contain a lot of salt.

Reducing the amount of processed foods you eat can help reduce the amount of salt you eat. Checking food labels can help you find out how much salt is in the food you are eating.

How do I know which foods contain a lot of salt?

Traffic light labelling is currently voluntary in the UK but where it is used it can help you make healthier choices. The traffic light system colours help you quickly see a food's nutrient levels in 100g. They show high, medium, or low amounts. Wherever possible aim for products that contain low (green) or medium (amber) levels of salt. For foods that don't display the traffic light label, here is a handy guide:

	Low	Medium	High
Salt	Less than 0.3g	0.3g - 1.5g	More than 1.5g
Sodium	Less than 0.1g	0.1g - 0.6g	More than 0.6g

How much is too much salt?

In the UK, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) recommends the following maximum salt intake children and adults:

Age	Maximum salt (grams per day)
1-3 years	2g
4-6 years	3g
7-10 years	5g
11 years and older	6g



It is recommended not to add salt to baby food or offer foods to them that are high in salt e.g. stock cubes, gravy.

How can we be more salt aware?

- Use little or no salt in cooking – use extra herbs and spices instead
- Leave the salt shaker off the table
- Cut down on salty processed foods and ready meals - cook at home if possible
- For foods that are high in salt (for example, cheese, smoked/cured meat and fish, olives, meat/yeast extract), aim to eat these less often and in smaller quantities
- Check food labels for salt and go for lower-salt choices (green and amber on the traffic light labelling)
- Some store cupboard products (for example, gravy stock cubes, soy sauce) can be high in salt
- If buying tinned vegetables and pulses, choose options without added salt
- If buying tinned fish and meals, avoid those tinned in brine (salt water)
- Switch salty snacks (for example, crisps, biscuits, salted nuts) for fruit, vegetable sticks, or options that don't have added salt
- In restaurants and takeaways ask that salt is not added to the meal
- Beware of gourmet salts and salt substitutes. They may claim to be healthier than table salt. But they are likely to still increase salt intake.

Sodium vs salt: what's the difference?

Salt is used as the everyday term for sodium chloride, a chemical compound. It is made from two components, sodium and chlorine, which gives it this name. Some manufacturers may mention the sodium content on their food labels but this is not required by law. Each 1g of sodium equals 2.5g of salt so keep this in mind when monitoring how much salt you eat.

Top Tips

Most of us eat too much salt. Eating too much salt can lead to high blood pressure which can have significant health risks. Eating less salt can greatly improve our health. To reduce the salt that we eat:

- Use less salt when cooking and at the table
- Eat fewer processed foods
- Check food labels and choose lower salt options.

This Food Fact Sheet is a public service of The British Dietetic Association (BDA) intended for information only. It is not a substitute for proper medical diagnosis or dietary advice given by a dietitian.

If you need to see a dietitian, visit your GP for a referral or bda.uk.com/find-a-dietitian for a private dietitian. You can check your dietitian is registered at hcpc-uk.org.

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