

Food Fact Sheet: Salt

Our body tissues are made up of vast number of cells of different shapes, sizes and functions, and all of these cells require enough salt to function properly. Salt plays a vital role in transporting water around the body, and in transmitting messages between the brain and the rest of the body. However, as with most things, too much salt in our diets can lead to problems such as water retention, raised blood pressure, and ultimately a higher risk of heart attack, kidney disease and stroke, so it's worth keeping within safe limits.

Salt and foods

Many everyday foods are not obviously salty, but they can contain high amounts of 'hidden salt'. While we may add salt to our food during cooking or just before we eat it, about 75% of the salt we eat is already added to the food we buy. Most of this comes from salt added to foods like processed meat products, snacks (such as crisps and biscuits), ready meals, soups and pasta sauces.

Even breads and breakfast cereals can contain a lot of salt, however many manufacturers have recently made some positive changes to the amount of salt they add. Making the decision to cut down on processed foods can make a big difference, and it's easier to do this if you are able to quickly check the salt content on food labels.

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

Due to recent changes in food labelling legislation, almost all food products now display a 'traffic light' label to help you make a healthier choice. 'Traffic light' colours help you to see, at a glance, if a food has high, medium or low amounts of each of these nutrients in 100g of the food. For foods that don't yet display the 'traffic light' label, here is a handy guide:

	Low	Medium	High
Salt	0g-0.3g	0.3g-1.5g	More than 1.5g
Sodium	0g-0.1g	0.1g-0.6g	More than 0.6g

To get an idea of how much salt you consume in an average day, it can be helpful to look at the amount of salt per serving, which you should also find on the label.

The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) recommends no more than 3g/day for children aged four to six years, and no more than 6g/day for healthy adults, however national food surveys show that many of us still exceed this recommendation by up to 33%. Furthermore, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommend that we should all aim to have no more than 3g/day by 2025, and that people at risk of heart disease should already be halving their salt intake.

Be Salt Aware:

- Use little or no salt in cooking – try using extra herbs and spices instead such as black pepper.
- Leave the salt shaker off the table.
- Cut down on salty processed foods and ready meals and try and make your own if you can.
- Check out food labels for salt and go for lower salt choices. There can be a really big difference between different types and brands.
- Use the traffic light labels on the front of packaging to help you make smarter choices.
- Compare salt levels among similar products and try to choose those lower in salt.
- Ask in restaurants and take-aways for no added salt.
- Be wary of gourmet salts and salt substitutes claiming to be better for your health than table salt – these product ranges are still likely to add some form of salt to your diet.

Sodium vs Salt: what's the difference?

Salt is the everyday term we use for a chemical compound called sodium chloride; salt is made from two components, sodium and chlorine, which give salt this chemical name. Although legislation does not require it, some manufacturers may still quote sodium content on their labels.

When thinking about salt intakes, it's important to know that each 1g of sodium translates to 2.5g of salt, and to take this into account when looking at your everyday salt consumption.

Foods worth checking for salt content:

- salted meats and processed meat products, e.g. ham, bacon, sausages, pate, salami
- ready-made and powdered soups
- ketchup, soy sauce, mayonnaise, pickles
- stock cubes, gravy powder and salted flavourings
- tinned food containing salt
- smoked meat and fish, prawns and anchovies
- meat and yeast extracts
- cheese
- salted snacks like crisps, nuts, biscuits, popcorn
- ready meals, sauces and takeaway meals
- pasta sauce
- bread and breakfast cereals.

Summary

Most of us are still eating too much salt. High salt intakes lead to high blood pressure that can pose significant health risks. Reducing your intake of salty foods can dramatically improve your health outcomes.

Simple steps that can reduce salt intake include adding less salt during cooking and at the table, eating less processed foods and being aware of food labels and choosing lower salt options.