

# Reduce salt in your diet

Adapted with permission from a patient resource prepared by The Queen Elizabeth Hospital Diabetes Centre, Adelaide, SA.

## What is salt?

Salt (sodium chloride) is a chemical compound that consists of sodium and chlorine. It is a flavour enhancer and also a preservative. It is found naturally in foods such as fruit, vegetables and meat, and is also added to foods during processing. Although salt flavour is one of the basic tastes, overconsumption of salt can cause a number of health problems including excessive fluid retention, high blood pressure, heart disease and kidney disease. It is the excessive sodium that is responsible for the increased risk of these chronic diseases.

## How much salt do we need?

A recommended adequate intake of sodium to reduce the risk of chronic disease is about 460 to 920 mg per day for adults (this is about 1.2 to 2.3 g of salt), and not more than 1600 mg (about 4.1 g of salt). The sodium that occurs naturally in foods provides this amount of sodium. The average Australian consumes up to 4600 mg of sodium per day (about 12 g of salt) from the following sources:

- 15% added in cooking or at the table
- 10% naturally present in fruit, vegetables and meat
- 75% from processed foods.

## Who needs to cut back on salt?

Everyone, regardless of age, should cut back on salt in their diet. A low salt intake can reduce the risk of health problems. For people with existing high blood pressure, heart disease or kidney problems, a low salt intake can assist in the control and management of these conditions.

## How do we cut back on salt?

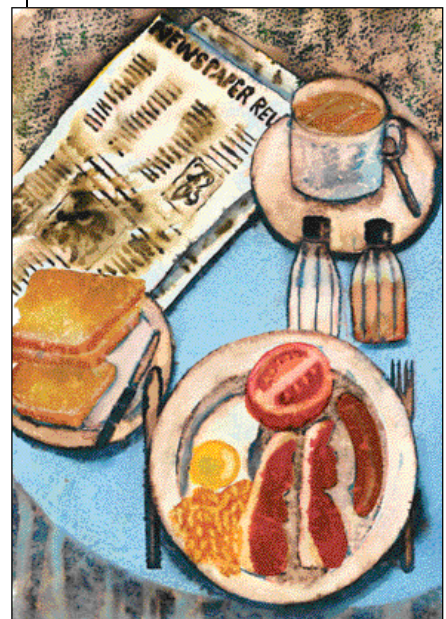
### Step 1: Skip the salt

- Avoid adding salt while preparing food and at the table.
- Steam, microwave or bake your vegetables without adding salt (these cooking methods retain the natural flavour of the food much better than cooking by boiling).
- Cook pasta, rice and potatoes without salt.

### Step 2: Choose low salt foods

- Choose 'low salt', 'no added salt' or 'reduced salt' products where possible.
- Avoid or at least limit processed foods such as processed meats, commercial sauces, packet soups, packet seasonings, gravy powder, stock cubes and stock powder.
- Look for salt reduced stock powders.
- Avoid potato chips/crisps and high salt takeaway foods.
- Use unsalted nuts.
- Eat a wide variety of foods from different food groups.

**Most people, and especially those with diabetes, could benefit from reducing their salt intake. This handout provides hints on how to cut back on salt in the diet.**



About three-quarters of the salt in our diet comes from processed foods. Avoiding eating meals such as a cooked breakfast of bacon, which is high in salt, plus eggs, to which salt is likely to be added, is one of many ways to cut back on salt in the diet.



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- Try making your own sauces, pickles and chutneys without added salt.
- Read food labels to check the salt (sodium) content of various foods – see the box on this page. Choose packaged foods with less than 120 mg sodium per 100 g (excellent choice) or less than 400 mg per 100 g (good choice).

**Step 3: Savour the flavour without salt**

- Add garlic, onion, horseradish, mustard or ginger to dishes for flavour.
- Use fresh or dried herbs to flavour food, e.g. add rosemary or oregano to baked lamb or beef, team chicken with thyme, add coriander to Asian dishes, and add parsley and dill to scrambled eggs.
- Use lemon or other citrus fruits to flavour meats or for salad dressings.
- Use fruit juices to add a different taste to savoury dishes.
- Use spices to flavour your dishes, e.g. cumin, cardamom, cloves, paprika and cinnamon.
- Add dry wine while cooking (most of the alcohol disappears and the flavour remains).

**Step 4: Be aware of salt in disguise**

There are a number of salt substitutes on the market (e.g. No Salt or Lite Salt).

Most of these still contain significant amounts of sodium and are not recommended. Others contain compounds that are not suitable for people with particular health conditions, especially high blood pressure or kidney problems. Consult your doctor before using any salt substitute.

There are many types of salt available that should be avoided. These include vegetable salt, celery salt, garlic salt, onion salt, rock salt and sea salt, which are all the same as ordinary table or cooking salt. Stock powders and monosodium glutamate (MSG) are also sources of sodium. The best and safest option is to avoid all types of salt and salt substitutes and to use reduced salt stock powders. Look for hidden sources of sodium on food packaging.

There is a period of adjustment in taste when reducing salt intake. It may be easier to cut back slowly to allow your taste buds to adapt. Remember to be patient!

**Salt and food labels**

Salt is listed on the nutrition panel of packaged food labels as sodium. Although most of the sodium in the diet comes from salt, which is used for both flavour and preservation in many processed foods, some comes from other sodium-containing ingredients such as monosodium glutamate (MSG), meat and vegetable extracts, stock cubes, baking powder and sodium bicarbonate. These hidden sources of sodium should be looked for on the ingredients list on packaged foods.

Foods that have a sodium content listed on the nutrition panel of 120 mg or less per 100 g of the food are an excellent choice in terms of sodium content; foods with 400 mg or less sodium per 100 g are a good choice. Be sure to check also the amounts of other nutrients in foods (such as saturated fat). An example of a nutrition information panel is given below – the food in this case is rolled oats, a particularly low sodium product used in mueslis and for porridge.

**Nutrition information panel**

Servings per package: 33

Serving size: 30 g

	Quantity per serving	Quantity per 100 g
Energy	460 kJ	1540 kJ
Protein	3.8 g	12.8 g
Fat		
– total	2.3 g	7.6 g
– saturated	0.5 g	1.5 g
Carbohydrate		
– total	7 g	56.7 g
– sugars	0.3 g	1.0 g
Dietary fibre	3 g	10 g
Sodium	Less than 5 mg	10 mg



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