

Halt the salt: 5 ways to cut down on sodium and improve your heart health

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It's a fact: Americans love salty foods—from hot dogs and pizza to popcorn and chips. Studies show people in the U.S. are among the world's largest consumers of salt: About 90% of children and adults eat

too much of it, and their appetite for it is only growing.

Salt is a rich source of [sodium](#), which the body needs to function normally. The problem: Too much sodium can raise [blood pressure](#), and [high blood pressure](#) is a risk factor for [heart disease](#) and stroke.

Researchers supported by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) are trying to unravel the mechanisms linking excess sodium and heart disease, a complex connection that is poorly understood. They hope their efforts not only help reduce heart disease, the leading cause of death, but also encourage anyone who routinely dives into a salty meal to embrace a simple message: Ease up.

"It's hard for most people to avoid foods that are high in sodium, in part because [salt](#) is hidden everywhere and people aren't always aware of foods that contain high amounts," said Alison Brown, Ph.D., a program director in the Prevention and Population Science Program in the NHLBI's Division of Cardiovascular Sciences and a registered dietitian.

More than 40% of the sodium we eat daily comes from 10 main sources of foods, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Among them: pizza, sandwiches, deli meats, soups, cheese, tacos and burritos, potato chips, fried chicken, scrambled eggs and omelets, and perhaps surprisingly, breads and rolls, which tend not to taste salty.

Brown said that one of the best ways to cut down on salt—and protect your heart, too—is by following the [Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension](#) (DASH) eating plan, which limits fats, sugars, and foods that are high in sodium while emphasizing fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low fat dairy, beans, nuts, fish, lean meats and poultry. The DASH plan, developed by researchers decades ago, is also scientifically proven to reduce blood pressure.

"The more you cut down on foods high in sodium and focus on eating more foods higher in potassium and magnesium, coupled with calcium-rich dairy products or dark leafy greens, the better your heart health will be," Brown said.

Here are five simple ways you can reduce sodium in your diet:

Choose fresh foods over salty, processed foods

Eat more fruits and vegetables. Skip or limit frozen dinners and other high-sodium fare such as pizza, fast food, packaged mixes, and canned soups or broths. Choose fresh or frozen skinless poultry, fish, and lean cuts of meat rather than those that are marinated, canned, smoked, brined, or cured. That includes limiting or avoiding salty meats like bacon, ham, and deli meats. Even seemingly innocent items like breads that contain moderate amounts of sodium can become a problem when eaten frequently. Prepare and eat more foods at home, where—unlike in [fast food](#) and other restaurants—you can control how much sodium is added.

Go 'low or no' with sodium-free or low-sodium foods

Check the [Nutrition Facts Panels](#) on food containers to identify sodium levels. Choose "low," "reduced-sodium," or "no-salt-added" versions of foods. You can even find low-salt (or no-salt) versions of your favorite snacks, such as [potato chips](#) and nuts, at many grocery stores. You might also want to track your sodium intake by comparing it with the recommendations in [The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), which advises adults to consume less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium each day as part of a healthy eating pattern. That's equal to about 1 teaspoon of table salt daily.

Use more herbs and spices

Boost flavor with herbs, spices, lemon, lime, vinegar, or salt-free seasoning blends instead of salt or salty seasonings like soy sauce, spice blends, or soup mixes. Start by cutting salt in half and work your way toward healthy substitutes. A recent [NHLBI-funded study](#) found that adding less salt to food can reduce your risk of developing heart disease, particularly heart failure and ischemic heart disease.

Limit the condiments, 'fixins' and side dishes

Limit your use of condiments such as salad dressings, ketchup, barbecue sauce, and hot sauce. Even consider limiting low sodium versions of [soy sauce](#) and teriyaki sauce, which should be used as sparingly as table salt. And go easy on those "fixins" and salty side dishes such as pickles, pickled vegetables, olives, and sauerkraut.

Talk to a nutrition expert about ways to control your sodium intake

Check with a registered dietitian, doctor, nurse, or other healthcare provider about reducing your sodium intake or your family's sodium intake. It's also a good idea to read updated health information on sodium from reputable sources, such as the [NHLBI](#) and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

Provided by NIH/National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute

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