

Shopping for Health: Sodium¹

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Sodium is a mineral found in table salt. While sodium is necessary for the body to maintain fluid balance and blood volume, consuming excess sodium may lead to high blood pressure and heart disease or stroke.

How much sodium do I need?

For optimum health, it is recommended that adults not exceed 2,300 mg of sodium (USDHHS and USDA 2015), which is the equivalent of about one teaspoon of salt per day. The sodium recommendation for healthy adults is 1,500 mg per day (National Academies of Science 2019). Most people consume far more sodium than they require.

Individuals with high blood pressure or other health conditions may be recommended by their doctors to follow a low-sodium diet. Most low-sodium diets limit sodium intake to no more than 1,500 mg per day (American Heart Association n.d.).

What foods are high in sodium?

In the United States, the main sources of sodium in the diet are breads and rolls, sandwich meats, pizza, poultry, soups, sandwiches, cheese, pasta and meat dishes, and savory snacks (CDC 2012). Salt is often added during processing to preserve foods and add flavor. For example, one slice of a typical frozen pizza has about 900 mg of

sodium (USDA-ARS 2019). Boxed meals with prepackaged flavorings are usually high in sodium as well—a single serving may contain more than 900 mg of sodium (USDA-ARS 2019). Avoiding highly processed foods may greatly decrease your daily sodium intake.

Adding condiments such as salad dressings or soy sauce may significantly increase the sodium content of foods. One tablespoon of soy sauce contains about 1,000 mg of sodium, and one tablespoon of salad dressing typically contains about 200 mg (USDA-ARS 2019). Choose lower-sodium options when they are available. Also, consider using an oil and vinegar dressing with herbs and spices in place of commercial salad dressings.

Shopping for Lower-Sodium Foods

A lower-sodium diet does not require cutting out specific food groups, but it does require conscientious shopping. Different brands of the same food may have dramatically different sodium contents, so it is important to always read the food labels. According to the FDA, “low-sodium” foods contain 140 mg or less of sodium per typical serving (USDHHS 2013). Foods with less than 5 mg of sodium can be labeled “salt-free” or “sodium-free.” “No salt added” does not necessarily mean that the food is a low-sodium food. It may naturally contain sodium.

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Vegetables

When buying vegetables, consider how they have been processed. Canned vegetables often contain high levels of sodium, added to enhance flavor and shelf life. Choosing fresh or frozen vegetables (without sauce), and canned vegetables labeled “low-sodium” or “no added salt” will help decrease your daily sodium intake, as long as you do not add salt at the table or during preparation. Table 1 lists various vegetables and their sodium contents based on how they have been processed (USDA-ARS 2019).

Bread

Although breads may not always taste “salty,” they may be high in sodium. Table 2 lists different types of breads and the amount of sodium in each (USDA-ARS 2019). Low-sodium alternatives to bread include corn tortillas, unsalted crackers, and lower-sodium, sprouted breads.

Meat

As with vegetables, meats vary in sodium content depending on their preparation. Processed meats such as luncheon meats and smoked or cured meats are high in sodium. Table 3 compares the amounts of sodium in fresh meat roasts to those in processed luncheon meats (Agarwal, Fulgoni, and Spence 2015).

The recommended serving size for most luncheon meats is 2 oz. However, many restaurant-style deli sandwiches provide about 5–6 oz of meat. One 2 oz serving of salami provides almost one-third of the recommended daily amount for sodium. If you were to prepare a sandwich with two slices of bread and 2 oz of luncheon meat, you would have already consumed nearly half of the recommended 1,500 mg of sodium for a day!

Cereal

Ready-to-eat breakfast cereals vary greatly in their levels of sodium. While there are some low-sodium cereals available, most have added salt. Sodium contents range from under 10 mg per serving in shredded wheat to over 350 mg per serving in some breakfast cereals. Examples of low-sodium cereals are shown in Table 4 (USDA-ARS 2019).

Cheese

Processed cheeses are generally high in salt and should be limited in lower-sodium diets. Some grocers carry low-sodium cheeses. Ricotta offers a lower-sodium alternative to cheese spread. The sodium contents of various cheeses are listed below in Table 5 (USDA-ARS 2019).

Snacks

Many popular snack foods, such as chips and crackers, are high in added salt. Pretzels have about 500 mg of sodium per serving, and a bowl of microwave popcorn has about 350 mg (USDA-ARS 2019). As with other food groups, some snacks may not taste “salty” but still contain a lot of sodium. For example, one snack-size pudding cup may have almost 200 mg of sodium (USDA-ARS 2019).

To satisfy the need to munch without the extra salt, you might try fruit or unsalted nuts as alternatives. Another option may be to look for brands that offer unsalted or lower-sodium versions of potato chips and pretzels that are unsalted.

Be an informed shopper!

Always be sure to read food labels to check sodium contents. The amount of sodium per serving is listed in milligrams (mg) on the Nutrition Facts panel. The Daily Value (DV) for sodium is 2,300 mg. When shopping, choose foods with a DV of 5% or less. Foods with more than 20% DV are considered high in sodium.

The next time you are grocery shopping, keep the following general guidelines in mind to limit sodium intake:

- Choose fresh, frozen, or low-sodium canned vegetables.
- Choose roasted meats rather than meats that have been smoked, cured, dried, or canned.
- Choose low-sodium salad dressings instead of regular dressings.
- Choose low-sodium soups or prepare lower-sodium homemade soups.
- Avoid prepackaged biscuit and waffle mixes. Instead, choose low-sodium cereals or oatmeal.
- Substitute dried or fresh herbs for higher-sodium condiments.
- Substitute unsalted crackers and corn tortillas for high-sodium snacks and breads.

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Table 1. Sodium content of vegetables.*

	Sodium (mg per 1/2 cup serving)			
	Fresh	Frozen (no salt)	Canned	Canned (low or no sodium)
Asparagus	1	3	346	32
Carrots	42	43	295	42
Collards	4	43	490	240
Yellow Corn	11	3	286	15
Green Beans	3	58	311	17
Peas, Green	3	4	214	11
Spinach	12	92	373	88

*Adding sauces or high-sodium dressings when preparing vegetables can significantly affect the sodium content.

Table 2. Typical sodium content of breads.

Bread	Sodium (mg/slice)
Italian	117
Mixed Grain	109
Pita, white (4")	150
Pumpernickel	174
Raisin	81
Rye	211
White	128
Whole Wheat	132

Table 3. Sodium contents of roasted meats and luncheon meats.

	Roast Meats Sodium mg/serving	Luncheon Meats Sodium mg/serving
Chicken	43	705
Turkey	40	705
Beef	32	630

2 oz servings

Table 4. Low-sodium cereals.

Cereal	Sodium (mg/serving)
Puffed Rice, Puffed Wheat and Toasted Wheat Germ Cereals	0
Kellogg's Frosted Mini-Wheats®	5
Kellogg's Mini-Wheats Original®	0
Quaker® 100% Natural Cereal with Oats, Honey & Raisins	127
Kellogg's Smacks®	51
Kellogg's All-Bran Original®	81
Kellogg's Corn Pops®	124

mg = milligrams

Table 5. Sodium contents of typical cheeses.

Cheese	Sodium (mg/oz)
Parmesan	433
American	422
Blue	395
Swiss	54
Provolone	248
Mozzarella	178
Cheddar	176