

Shaking the salt habit



There are many flavoursome ways you can avoid the silent killer, dietitian **Sue Radd** reports.

Most people believe they eat a fairly low-salt diet but a closer inspection of their dietary habits can reveal many hidden sources of sodium — the harmful part of salt — and, very often, surprisingly high levels of this killer condiment.

For many health conditions, the effects of dietary salt build up and you don't feel them initially. As we age, these chronic effects then precipitate as a major cause of diet-related disease for people over the age of 50.

A study published this year suggests that the negative effects of salt can also be seen in the bodies of healthy people within 30 minutes of being eaten. A high-salt meal reduced the flexibility of arteries in these people by half — similar to the effect observed after eating a fatty meal!

Too much of a good thing?

Sodium is an essential mineral required in very small amounts in the body to help regulate muscle and nerve function. It is also a component of all bodily fluids: blood, sweat and tears. But a high-salt intake (as occurs with a typical Aussie diet) has been found to aggravate or cause over 20 health-related problems, including high blood pressure, stroke, asthma, osteoporosis, severe vertigo, congestive heart failure, stomach cancer, kidney stones and diabetic retinopathy!

Australians are eating 5–10 times more salt than the body needs and most of this comes without even reaching for the shaker — foods purchased at the supermarket, dining out or take-aways, and packet snacks. If you have reached midlife or already have hypertension, diabetes or chronic kidney disease, the latest health guidelines suggest you reduce your sodium intake to 1600mg per day (the amount contained in about one level teaspoon of salt).

Did you know?

High blood pressure is the most common reason for visiting a GP [see also page 38]. And the risk of heart disease starts early, with a blood pressure level of just 115/75mmHg and doubles with each increment of 20/10mmHg! All the more reason to know your figures and keep the pressure down!

Your meals at home – minus the salt

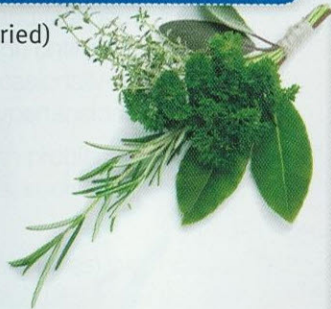
Skipping salt and becoming adventurous with a range of flavoursome alternatives can boost your health, palate and culinary skills! But get ready for a little adjustment: it usually takes 4–6 weeks to adapt to a low-salt diet. By six months, your palate will have recovered enough to be described as truly normal for the first time since infancy. This means you will be able to detect and enjoy natural and subtle food flavours again.

10 easy ways to skip salt

1. Sprinkle fresh herbs into pasta dishes, vegetables and on meat
2. Source juicy, ripe tomatoes and fresh garlic for sauces
3. Add crushed garlic, ginger and chilli to stir-fries or squeeze in some lime juice
4. Use red wine to spruce up stews, casseroles and bolognaise
5. Create an authentic pizza flavour with dried oregano and marjoram
6. Combine fresh fennel and dill to complement fish dishes
7. Toss basil leaves into a tomato-based dish
8. Drizzle lemon or vinegar on salads and fish
9. Roast capsicums, squash and parsnip to bring out their flavour
10. Stir in white wine when making risottos and chicken sauces

Stock your pantry with these flavour enhancers:

- Herbs and spices (fresh and dried)
- Lemon, lime and oranges
- Wine and gourmet vinegars – apple cider, Balsamic, rice wine
- Potassium salt substitute
- Salt-reduced stock powders* (vegetable, beef, chicken)
- Use salt-reduced powders sparingly as most still contain significant amounts of sodium. Salt Skip stock powder made by Eumarrah is low sodium. This is available from some health-food shops and by mail order: (03) 6273 9511.



Clever shopping swaps

High-sodium food	Healthy alternative	Sodium saving!
Salted nuts (30g)	Unsalted nuts (30g)	106mg
Baked beans (125g)	Heinz No Added Salt baked beans	437mg
Fetta cheese (25g)	Low-fat ricotta cheese	285mg
Tuna canned in brine (96g can)	Tuna canned in springwater (95g)	175mg
Liquid stock (250ml)	Salt reduced liquid stock (250ml)	495mg

Shopping the low-salt way

What do terms like '40% less salt', 'reduced salt' and 'no added salt' actually mean? Are products with these claims low enough in sodium? Next time you're grocery shopping, take a closer look at the nutrition information panel. You may be in for a surprise!

If you have a medical condition, such as high blood pressure or diabetes, source products that contain less than 120mg sodium per 100g. These are truly low salt/sodium. For many processed foods, this can be difficult to achieve because salt also provides various functional properties e.g., it strengthens the gluten in bread and affects the ripening and texture of cheese.

Reduced salt: the salt content has been reduced by at least 25% compared to the original formula but it may still be high e.g., salt-reduced soy sauce still contains around 3500mg sodium per 100ml, which is 29 times higher than acceptable if you are following a low-salt eating plan!

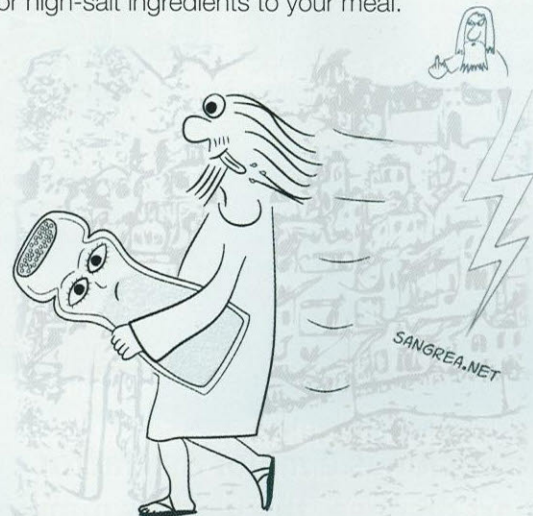
No added salt: no salt has been added to the product. If sodium is contained within any of the ingredients, the overall product is still required by law to provide less than 120mg of sodium per 100g. You are safe in choosing 'no added salt' foods.

Heart Tick: products with the Heart Foundation Tick aren't necessarily low salt, although the level of sodium is reduced according to their requirements. Here are the sodium targets for a few of their food categories so you can see why it's still a good idea to check the fine print:

- Breads – <400mg per 100g
- Biscuits – <250mg per 100g
- Cheeses – <750mg per 100g.

Eating out tips

If you're serious about feeling well and protecting your body from salt damage, it's smart to avoid most fast foods (unless you've checked the company's nutrition information). And next time you're dining out, ask the chef to omit adding any salt or high-salt ingredients to your meal.



LOT WASN'T ALTOGETHER UNHAPPY ABOUT GOD TURNING HIS WIFE INTO A TABLE CONDIMENT, BUT IN LATER LIFE HE SUFFERED TERRIBLY FROM HARDENING OF THE ARTERIES.

What's in your salt shaker?

Not all salt looks pure white. Unrefined salts may come in pink, brown, black or grey colours. While these pretty salts are often promoted as a source of minerals, they still contain massive amounts of sodium. Fancy salts are just a more expensive way of doing yourself harm! ♥

Sue Radd is an Accredited Practising Dietitian, Founding Director of the Nutrition and Wellbeing Clinic, an author and host of Culinary Medicine Cookshops in Sydney: www.sueradd.com, (02) 9899 5208