

Patient information: Low-sodium diet (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is sodium? — Sodium is the main ingredient in table salt. It is also found in lots of foods, and even in water. The body needs a very small amount of sodium to work normally, but most people eat much more sodium than their body needs.

Who should cut down on sodium? — Nearly everyone eats too much sodium. The average American takes in 3,400 milligrams of sodium each day. Experts say that many people should have no more than 2,300 milligrams a day, and many people should have even less.

Ask your doctor how much sodium you should have.

Why should I cut down on sodium? — Reducing the amount of sodium you eat can have lots of health benefits:

- It can lower your blood pressure, which means it can help reduce your risk of stroke, heart attack, kidney damage, and lots of other health problems.
- It can reduce the amount of fluid in your body, which means that your heart doesn't have to work as hard to push a lot of fluid around.
- It can keep the kidneys from having to work too hard. This is especially important in people who have kidney disease.
- It can reduce swelling in the ankles and belly, which can be uncomfortable and make it hard to move.
- It can reduce the chances of forming kidney stones.
- It can help keep your bones strong.

Which foods have the most sodium? — Processed foods have the most sodium. These foods usually come in cans, boxes, jars, and bags. They tend to have a lot of sodium even if they don't taste salty. In fact, many sweet foods have a lot of sodium in them. The only way to know for sure how much sodium you are getting is to check the label ([figure 1](#)).

Here are some examples of foods that often have too much sodium:

- Canned soups
- Rice and noodle mixes
- Sauces, dressings, and condiments (such as ketchup and mustard)
- Pre-made frozen meals (also called "TV dinners")
- Deli meats, hot dogs, and cheeses
- Smoked, cured, or pickled foods
- Restaurant meals

What should I do to reduce the amount of sodium in my diet? — Many people think that avoiding the salt shaker and not adding salt to their food means that they are eating a low-sodium diet. This is not true. Not adding salt at the table or when cooking will help a little. But almost all of the sodium you eat is already in the food you buy at the grocery store or at restaurants ([figure 2](#)).

The most important thing you can do to cut down on sodium is to eat less processed food. That means that you should avoid most foods that are sold in cans, boxes, jars and bags. You should also eat in restaurants less often.

Instead of buying pre-made, processed foods, buy fresh or fresh-frozen fruits and vegetables. (Fresh-frozen foods are foods that are frozen without anything added to them.) Buy meats, fish, chicken, and turkey that are fresh instead of canned or sold at the deli counter. (Meats sold at the deli counter are high in sodium). Then try making meals from scratch at home using these low-sodium ingredients.

If you must buy canned or packaged foods, choose ones that are labeled "sodium free" or "very low sodium" ([table 1](#)). Or choose foods that have less than 400 milligrams of sodium in each serving. The amount of sodium in each serving appears on the nutrition label that is printed on canned or packaged foods ([figure 1](#)).

Also, whatever changes you make, make them slowly. Choose one thing to do differently, and do that for a while. If that change sticks, add another change. For instance, if you usually eat green beans from a can, try buying fresh or fresh-frozen green beans and cooking them at home without adding salt. If that works for you, keep doing it. Then choose another thing to change. If it doesn't work, don't give up. See if you can cut down on sodium another way. The important thing is to take small steps and to stick with the changes that work for you.

What if I really like to eat out? — You can still eat in restaurants once in a while. But choose places that offer healthier choices. Fast-food places are almost always a bad idea. As an example, a typical meal of a hamburger and french fries from a popular fast-food chain has about 1,600 milligrams of sodium. That's more sodium than many people should eat in a day!

When choosing what to order:

- Ask your server if your meal can be made without salt
- Avoid foods that come with sauces or dips
- Choose plain grilled meats or fish and steamed vegetables
- Ask for oil and vinegar for your salad, rather than dressing

What if food just does not taste as good without sodium? — First of all, give it time. Your taste buds can get used to having less sodium, but you have to give them a chance to adjust. Also try other flavorings, such as herbs and spices, lemon juice, and vinegar.

What about salt substitutes? — Do not use salt substitutes unless your doctor or nurse approves. Some salt substitutes can be dangerous to your health, especially if you take certain medicines.

Do medicines have sodium? — Yes, some medicines have sodium. If you are buying medicines you can get without a prescription, look to see how much sodium they have. Avoid products that have "sodium carbonate" or "sodium bicarbonate" unless your doctor prescribes them. (Sodium bicarbonate is baking soda.)

More on this topic

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Topic 16108 Version 6.0

GRAPHICS

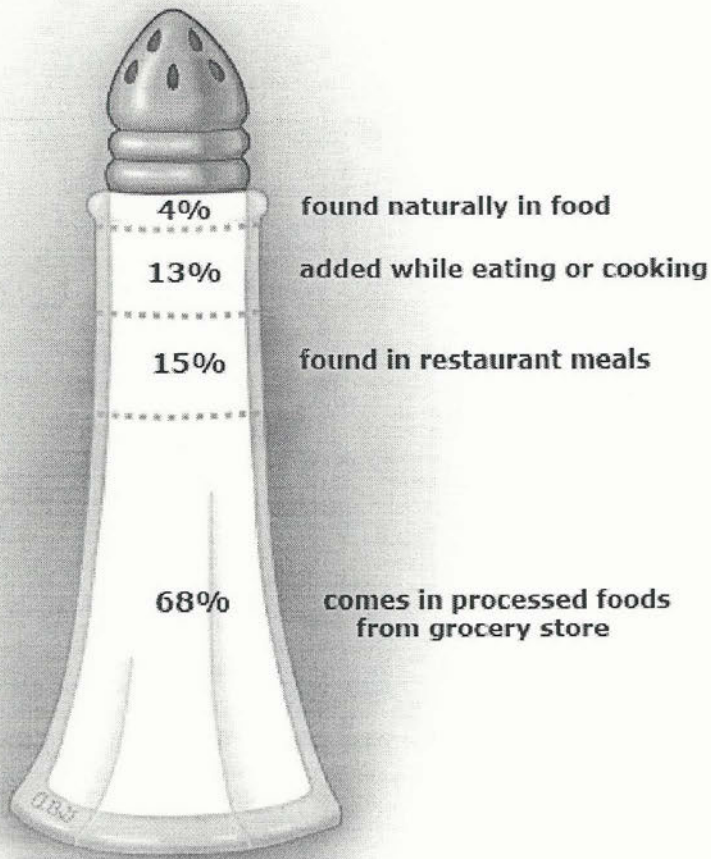
Food labels can be tricky



To figure out how much sodium you are eating, check the label to find out how much sodium is in one serving. If you are having more than one serving, multiply that amount by the number of servings you plan to eat. For instance, if you are going to eat this whole can of soup, you should multiply 850 by 2. That means that you will be having 1700 milligrams of sodium. That's more sodium than many people are supposed to have in one day.

‰: percent.

Sources of sodium in your diet



=: percent.

Original data from: He FJ, MacGregor GA. Reducing population salt intake worldwide: from evidence to implementation. Prog Cardiovasc Dis 2010; 52:363.

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What do labels about sodium mean?

Sodium free	A tiny amount of sodium in each serving
Very low sodium	35 milligrams or less in each serving
Low sodium	140 milligrams or less in each serving
Reduced sodium	Usual level of sodium is reduced by 25 percent
Light or lite in sodium	Usual level of sodium is reduced by 50 percent

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