

Patient Information

For : Educational Material

High Blood Pressure: Low-Sodium Diet

Dietary recommendations

Most of the salt in the average diet comes from processed foods, including canned or boxed foods and restaurant foods. Foods may contain a lot of salt even if they don't taste salty. Learn which foods to avoid by reading labels to find out how much sodium is in the foods. Table salt added to foods is another common source of sodium in the diet. By checking labels and not adding salt to foods, you can reduce the amount of sodium in your diet. Follow these guidelines:

- Add very little or no salt to food that you prepare.
- Do not add salt to food at the table.
- Read labels carefully. Look for any form of sodium or salt, such as sodium benzoate or sodium citrate. Choose foods that have less salt.
- Check the sodium content when you use baking powder, baking soda, and monosodium glutamate (MSG).
- Fast foods are very high in salt, as are many other restaurant foods. When you eat at a restaurant, try steamed fish and vegetables or fresh salads. Avoid soups.
- Avoid eating the following foods unless you can find unsalted or low-sodium versions:
 - ketchup, prepared mustard, pickles, and olives
 - soy sauce, steak or barbecue sauce, chili sauce, and Worcestershire sauce
 - bouillon made with bouillon cubes
 - commercially prepared or cured meats or fish (for example, bacon, luncheon meats, and canned sardines)
 - canned vegetables, soups, and other packaged convenience foods
 - salty cheeses and buttermilk
 - salted nuts and peanut butter
 - self-rising flour and biscuit mixes
 - salted crackers, chips, popcorn, and pretzels
 - commercial salad dressings
 - instant cooked cereals.

Many of these foods are now available in unsalted or low-sodium versions. Read all labels carefully.

If your diet must be restricted to much lower amounts of sodium, talk to your healthcare provider and a registered dietitian for help in planning your meals. It is important to keep your meals nutritionally balanced and tasty. It can be hard to follow a restricted-salt diet if the food doesn't taste good, but there are many healthy ways to add taste without adding salt or fat.

Salt substitutes

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Ask your healthcare provider about using salt substitutes. Most salt substitutes contain potassium for flavor. If you are taking certain medications, you may need to be careful about the amount of potassium in your diet.

Substitutions and hints

- Season foods with herbs and spices. Use onions, garlic, parsley, lemon and lime juice and rind, dill weed, basil, tarragon, marjoram, thyme, curry powder, turmeric, cumin, paprika, vinegar, or wine to enhance the flavor and aroma of foods. Mushrooms, celery, red pepper, yellow pepper, green pepper, and dried fruits also enhance some dishes.
- Eat fresh foods (instead of canned or packaged foods) as much as possible. Also, plain frozen fruits and vegetables usually do not have added salt.
- Add a pinch of sugar or a squeeze of lemon juice to bring out the flavor in fresh vegetables.
- If you must use canned products, use the low-sodium types (except for fruit). Rinse canned vegetables with tap water before cooking.
- Substitute unsalted, polyunsaturated margarine for regular margarine or butter.
- Eat low-sodium cheeses. Many are available now, some with herbs and spices that are very tasty. Many are also low fat.
- Drink low-sodium juices.
- Make unsalted or lightly salted soup stocks and keep them in the freezer to use as substitutes for canned broth and bouillon. Use these stocks to enhance vegetables.
- Enhance flavors with wines and vinegars (especially the flavored vinegars) instead of salt.
- Eat tuna and salmon, rinsing it first with running water.
- Use herbs such as bay leaf, curry, turmeric, cumin, cilantro, dill, marjoram, paprika, pepper, tarragon, thyme, sage, onions, and garlic to season chicken, beef, or fish.

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- Cook rice in homemade broth with mushrooms and scallions or shallots.

Help yourself become healthier

- Check food labels for sodium and fat content.
- Get information about nutrition at your local library, from the American Heart Association, and through nutrition programs and health fairs. Ask your healthcare provider for printed information on nutrition, diet, and health.
- Contact a dietitian for information.
- Look for some of the excellent low-sodium cookbooks available in most bookstores.
- Take time to plan and enjoy your meals. You will be pleasantly surprised at how fast you learn new food preparations, how lowering the sodium in your diet lowers your blood pressure, and how good food can be.

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