



# Current Perspective on Sodium

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We all need sodium for good health. In fact, sodium is an essential nutrient that helps to control our blood pressure. Sodium also works with potassium to maintain the right balance of fluids in our body. Not everyone reacts to sodium in the same way, though. For many people, eating too much sodium raises their chances of developing high blood pressure. But for others, their blood pressure may drop or not change at all. Let's take a closer look at sodium—including how it can affect your health, why it's added to foods, how much you need, where sodium is found, and how you can make better food choices.

## Sodium and your health

The main role of sodium is to regulate our blood pressure. Most of the sodium we eat is in the form of salt, also known as sodium chloride. For people who are “salt sensitive”, eating excess amounts of salt can put them at a higher risk for developing hypertension (high blood pressure), which is a major risk factor for heart disease, stroke and kidney disease. Those who are commonly sensitive to salt include Canadians of African descent, people over the age of 45, and those with diabetes or impaired kidney function.

## Table salt, sea salt, and kosher salt—what's the difference?

The main differences are the source and the size of the salt:

- **Table salt** is a fine-grained salt from salt mines, and contains 99% sodium chloride.
- **Sea salt** is made from the evaporation of seawater. It contains 95–98% sodium chloride and 2–5% trace minerals, giving it a slightly different taste than table salt. The salt crystals may be fine or coarse.
- **Kosher salt** is essentially table salt, but has larger crystals and does not contain iodine.

### Did you know?

In Canada, table salt is iodized. This means that iodine has been added into salt to prevent iodine deficiency diseases such as goiter.

By weight, kosher salt contains the same amount of sodium as table salt. Sea salt contains almost the same amount of sodium as table salt and kosher salt.

## Why are sodium and salt added to foods?

There are a few reasons why sodium and salt are added to foods:

- **Taste:** Sodium and salt bring out a food's natural flavour.
- **Food processing:** By retaining water, salt helps to tenderize meat. Salt also controls the ripening and moisture content of cheese. In bread, salt keeps yeast from fermenting out of control, and helps to create a less sticky dough.
- **Food preservative:** In foods such as cured meat, salt acts as a preservative and helps to control the growth of food-spoiling bacteria.



### How much sodium do we need?

The U.S. Institute of Medicine has developed two sodium recommendations for use in North America:

- an “Adequate Intake”, which is the amount of sodium that will meet the needs of most healthy individuals; and
- an “Upper Level”, which is the highest continuous daily amount of sodium intake that doesn’t appear to put a person at risk for health problems.

This chart shows the sodium recommendations for different age groups:

Recommended Amounts of Sodium		
Age	Adequate Intake (mg/day)	Upper Level (mg/day)
1–3 years	1000	1500
4–8 years	1200	1900
9–13 years	1500	2200
14–50 years	1500	2300
51–70 years	1300	2300
>70 years	1200	2300

Source: Institute of Medicine. *Dietary Reference Intakes for Water, Potassium, Sodium, Chloride, and Sulfate*. National Academies Press, Washington, DC, 2004.

The fact is that most of us are eating more than these recommended amounts. Information from the latest nutrition survey in Canada shows that the average adult eats more than 3,000 mg of sodium a day, well above the recommended Upper Level. Children and teens are also eating much more sodium than the recommended daily maximums.

### Where’s the sodium?

Going easy on the salt shaker is important but won’t dramatically reduce your overall sodium intake. That’s because only 11% of the sodium we eat comes from the salt that we add to our food when eating or cooking. While sodium is naturally found in many foods, 75% of the sodium we eat comes from *processed* foods such as pizza, sandwiches, submarines, hamburgers, hot dogs, soups and pasta dishes.

The chart on the next page shows the sodium content of different foods.

Sodium is also found in these common food additive ingredients:

Food Additive Ingredients that Contain Sodium	
Name of ingredient	What it is
Monosodium glutamate (MSG)	Flavour enhancer
Sodium bicarbonate (baking soda)	Leavening agent used to add volume to baked goods
Sodium benzoate	Preservative used in fruit juices, jams and drinks
Sodium nitrite/nitrate	Preservative used in cured meats
Sodium propionate	Preservative used in baked goods, pudding and meat products
Sodium sulphite	Preservative used in dried fruit





## Get sodium savvy in the marketplace

Here's a snapshot of just some common sodium-containing foods.\* See what a difference it makes when you choose sodium-reduced versions of foods, and find hidden sodium in foods you never would have guessed! Remember that the daily recommended sodium intake for adults is between 1200 and 2300 mg.

Food and Serving Amount	Sodium Content (mg)
<b>Smoked, cured and deli meats</b>	
Bacon – 3 slices, uncooked (80 g)	660
Bacon, reduced salt – 3 slices, uncooked (80 g)	420
Black forest ham – 3 slices (65 g)	720
Hot dog, low fat – 1 hot dog (37 g)	480
<b>Canned and bottled foods</b>	
Chicken broth – 2/3 cup (150 mL)	590
Chicken broth, reduced in sodium – 2/3 cup (150 mL)	370
Corn, peaches and cream, canned – ½ cup (125 mL)	420
Cream of mushroom soup, condensed – ½ cup (125 mL)	850
Cream of mushroom soup, condensed, 25% less salt – ½ cup (125 mL)	630
Kidney beans, white – ½ cup (125 mL)	420
Salmon, sockeye – ½ can (106 g)	440
Salmon, sockeye, low sodium – ½ can (106 g)	85
Tomatoes, diced – ½ cup (125 mL)	300
Tomatoes, stewed – ½ cup (125 mL)	660
Vegetable cocktail – 1 cup (250 mL)	520
Vegetable cocktail, low sodium – 1 cup (250 mL)	135
<b>Snacks and crackers</b>	
Potato chips (all dressed) – 20 chips (50 g)	600
Saltines, salted – 7 crackers	230
Saltines, unsalted – 7 crackers	140

Food and Serving Amount	Sodium Content (mg)
<b>Seasonings and condiments</b>	
Green curry sauce (Thai) – ½ cup (125 mL)	740
Ketchup – 1 Tbsp (15 mL)	140
Salt, table – 1 tsp (6 g)	2400
Soy sauce, regular – 1 Tbsp (15 mL)	920
Soy sauce, less sodium – 1 Tbsp (15 mL)	580
Steak sauce – 1 Tbsp (15 mL)	160
<b>Bread and baked goods</b>	
Apple pie – 1/10 pie (100 g)	180
Whole wheat bread – 2 slices (75 g)	390
Muffins, blueberry – 2 mini muffins (46 g)	240
<b>Single serving frozen entrées</b>	
Creamy chicken alfredo – 300 g	630
Macaroni and cheese – 255 g	800
Meat lasagna – 286 g	900
<b>Fast foods</b>	
Hamburger, 1 small (101 g)	510
Pizza, pepperoni – 1 slice (93 g)	580
Chicken pot pie – 1 (580 mg)	1550
Bean burrito – 1 (198 g)	1100

\*Data collected August 18, 2008 in Toronto, Ontario.  
Product formulations may change, so read nutrition labels often.





### Making better choices

In 2007, a National Sodium Policy, developed by 17 Canadian health groups and professional associations, recommended that we reduce our daily sodium intakes to between 1200 and 2300 mg by the year 2020.

Food manufacturers have started to reduce the sodium content of their products or are offering lower sodium alternatives. Here's what you can do to cut back on sodium.

#### When shopping:

- ✓ Buy the lower sodium versions of foods. Look for the words “salt-free”, “low-salt”, “low sodium”, “reduced in sodium” or “no added sodium” on the food package.
- ✓ Compare different brands of foods, and choose the ones with a lower % Daily Value (% DV) for sodium. For example, the sodium content of ½ cup (125 mL) of pasta sauce can range from 12% DV (280 mg of sodium) to 30% DV (720 mg sodium).
- ✓ Buy frozen entrées, pickled foods and salty snacks only once in a while.

#### When eating out:

- ✓ Check out restaurant menus online before you order so that you can see how the sodium stacks up among different choices.
- ✓ Order smaller portions. The bigger the portion, the more sodium you'll get.
- ✓ Ask for all sauces and gravies on the side.

#### When cooking:

- ✓ Cook from scratch whenever you can, using unprocessed foods. That way, you can control the amount of salt and sodium you use.
- ✓ Flavour food with fresh garlic, ginger, herbs, spices and lemon juice.
- ✓ Rinse canned vegetables and canned beans to wash away some of the salt.
- ✓ Make your own salad dressings with flavoured vinegars.
- ✓ Don't add salt to the cooking water when boiling potatoes, pasta or rice.

#### At home, school and work:

- ✓ Eat fresh or frozen vegetables and fruit instead of canned ones.
- ✓ Make sandwiches with baked or grilled meats rather than using canned or processed deli meats.
- ✓ Snack on unsalted nuts and pretzels.
- ✓ Give your taste buds some time to adjust to eating sodium-reduced foods.

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