

Be Sodium Savvy

Our body needs salt to survive, send nerve impulses and contract and relax our muscles. As a bonus salt adds flavour and helps preserve foods. However, in our North American food system we get way too much of a good thing. The average Canadian consumes about 3400 milligrams of sodium daily. This is over double the recommended intake of 1500 milligrams, and it is fifty per cent higher than the upper tolerable limit of 2400 milligrams (which equals one teaspoon).

This high salt intake does not come without consequences. According to the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation three in ten Canadians have high blood pressure caused by too much dietary salt. High blood pressure is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease and has been identified by the World Health Organization as the leading risk factor for premature death in the world.

So where does all this salt come from? Roughly eighty percent of sodium in the diet comes from processed foods and restaurants. It is important to read nutrition labels because salt can be hidden in less obvious places such as breakfast cereals and vegetable juices that boast numerous health claims. Some popular breakfast cereals have up to 350 milligrams of sodium per serving (and most people eat more than one serving) and vegetable juices can have close to 500 milligrams of sodium per cup. Other sources that often surprise the unsuspecting consumer include canned vegetables, cheeses, smoked salmon, lunch meats, baked beans, store bought bran muffins, canned soups and tomato sauces.

More obvious sources of sodium are found in the fast food items. A burger and fries meal could easily tally up 1500 milligrams of sodium. Yet even the health conscious fast food eater can be hard pressed to find low salt options. Some fast food restaurant salads pack in 1200 milligrams or more and a six inch sub might contain 1200-1800 milligrams of sodium, remember that's almost double in a foot long!

Here are a few strategies to reduce your salt intake. When eating out order dressings on the side and watch out for foods described as pickled, marinated, smoked, barbequed, teriyaki, soy sauce, broth, miso, gravy, bacon and, of course, salted. Look for products that contain less than 200 milligrams of sodium per serving. Be aware of serving sizes and think about how many servings you usually eat. What may seem like only a small amount of sodium can add up fast as you double or triple the servings. Thoroughly rinse canned foods. And of course, the best way to avoid a high salt diet is to shop the perimeter of the grocery store, choose whole foods and cook from scratch as much as possible.

For more information on sodium visit the Healthy Families BC website at: <http://www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca/sodium-sense>

Author: Simone Jennings, is a registered dietitian with Interior Health

Date: June 25, 2013

