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Do we really need salt in our diet?

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What is salt? The word salt comes from the Latin word "sal," meaning salt. It was once a valuable commodity, and it has been used as a currency for trading. The English word "salary" comes from the word salt.

Salt has long been used for flavoring and for preserving food. It has also been used in tanning, dyeing and bleaching, and the production of pottery, soap, and chlorine. Today, it is widely used in the chemical industry.

Table salt or common salt is a mineral composed primarily of sodium chloride, a chemical compound belonging to the larger class of salts; salt in its natural form as a **crystalline** mineral is known as rock salt or halite.

But why do we need salt in our diet and how much salt should we or should not consume?

First, we literally cannot survive without sodium. Salt (a.k.a. sodium chloride) is our main supply of this mineral, which helps our muscles contract, sends nerve impulses throughout our bodies and regulates fluid balance so we don't become dehydrated.

Salt is composed of sodium and chloride, which are two electrolytes that help maintain fluid balance and the transmission of nerve impulses. In your intestines, sodium helps your body absorb chloride, amino acids, glucose and water. Sodium also helps your body regulate blood pressure.

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It commonly features at the table or in the kitchen as free-flowing table salt, rock salt, sea salt, or kosher salt. High levels of salt, or sodium, come hidden in everyday foods, from fast food to frozen chicken.

The body uses sodium to maintain fluid levels. A balance of fluid and sodium is necessary for the health of the heart, liver, and kidneys. It regulates blood fluids and prevents low blood pressure.

Effects of too little salt:

Low sodium levels can result if there is too much fluid in the body, for example, because of fluid retention. Diuretics are given in this case, to reduce fluid retention.

Other causes of low sodium in the body include addison disease, a blockage in the small intestine, **diarrhea** and vomiting, an underactive thyroid, heart failure.

If sodium levels fall in the blood, this affects brain activity. The person may feel sluggish and **lethargic**. They may experience muscle twitches, followed by seizures, a loss of consciousness, **coma**, and death. If sodium levels fall quickly, this may happen very fast.

In older people, symptoms can be severe.

One study found that when rats were deprived of sodium, they kept away from activities that they normally enjoyed. The researchers suggested, therefore, that sodium could act as an antidepressant.

Too much salt:

Excess sodium intake has been linked to health problems, such as osteoporosis, kidney disease,

and **hypertension,** or high blood pressure, which can lead to cardiovascular disease and stroke.

The American Heart Association (AHA) explain that when there is too much sodium in the blood, it "pulls more water into the bloodstream." As the volume of blood increases, the heart has to work harder to pump it around the body. In time, this can stretch the walls of the blood vessels.

High blood pressure also contributes to the build up of plaque in the arteries, leading to a greater risk of stroke and heart disease, among other problems.

The AHA urge people to consume more potassium at the same time as reducing their sodium intake. Potassium is believed to lessen the negative effects of sodium.

Sodium has also been shown to overstimulate the immune system, suggesting a link with autoimmune diseases such as lupus, multiple sclerosis, allergies, and other conditions.

Researchers have found that children who consume salty foods are more likely to have a sugary drink with it. The combination could increase the risk of obesity.

Sources of salt

Salt and sodium occur naturally dissolved in seawater, or as a crystalline solid in rock salt.

The salt we eat today comes largely from the processed and convenience foods in our diet, but some natural and unprocessed foods also contain salt or sodium. It occurs naturally in meats, seafood, eggs, some vegetables, and dairy products.

How much salt?

Most Americans take in too much salt, and 75 percent of it is hidden in processed and packaged food. The American Heart Association recommend a maximum intake of no more than 2.3 grams (g) or

2,300 miligrams (mg) of sodium a day, or around 1 teaspoon, and preferably no more than 1,500 mg.

What does 1,500 mg of sodium look like?

- one egg: up to 140 mg
- 30 g of milk: around 180 mg
- 200 g of plain yogurt: 40 mg
- 200 g of natural, low-fat yogurt: 76 mg
- 50 g of raw celery: 140 mg
- 60 g cooked spinach: 120 mg

Other vegetables are low in sodium, but canned vegetables have added salt and a far higher sodium content.

Dietitians urge people not to add extra salt to their food because enough is already added, if it is processed or packaged.

Infants under one year should not be given salt because their kidneys are not matured.

Power Words

- **Crystalline**: having the structure and form of a crystal; composed of crystals.
- **Diarrhea**: A condition in which faeces in a liquid form.
- **Lethargic:** having little energy; feeling unwilling and unable to do anything.
- **Bleaching:** cause a material (such as cloth, hair) to become white or much lighter by exposure to sunlight.
- **Hypertension:** abnormally high blood pressure.
- **Coma:** a prolonged state of deep unconsciousness, caused especially by severe injury or illness.

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