

SALT/SODIUM IN THE DIET



■ WHAT IS THE JOB OF SALT IN THE DIET?

Salt or sodium has many important functions in the body and our bodies cannot produce it. Sodium controls water balance in cells and sends nerve impulses throughout the body. It controls blood volume and is used by muscles (including the heart) to contract and relax. However, researchers are more and more concerned that many Americans have too much salt in their diets. Too much salt can lead to hypertension (high blood pressure), which increases the risk of a stroke or heart attack. However, be aware that aging, pain medications, antidepressants, diuretics, heart or kidney failure, and some other diseases can cause the body to improperly process the salt/sodium that is taken in.

■ HOW MUCH SODIUM IN THE DIET IS ENOUGH?

A recent study showed that if people could cut back their salt intake by 25% to 35%, they could reduce their risk of heart and vascular disease by as much as 25%. The American Heart Association recommends an average of 2300 milligrams of sodium per day for all Americans. However, the Institutes of Medicine recommends an average of 1500 milligrams of sodium per day in the diet. People with Congestive Heart Failure (CHF) have found that restricting sodium to 2000 milligrams each day helps to maintain water balance.

■ WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF SODIUM IN THE DIET?

Taking the salt shaker off the table is not enough. Eighty percent (80%) of salt in the diet comes from eating out, packaged and processed foods. For example, one cup of canned soup can contain more than 50% of the recommended allowance of salt (sodium) per day. One slice of lunch meat can have 350 mg of salt.

■ HOW CAN I REDUCE THE AMOUNT OF SALT IN MY DIET?

When sodium is combined with chloride, it is called salt. 1 tsp. of salt = 2200 milligrams of sodium. There are no calories in sodium.

- Choose fresh, frozen or canned foods with no added salt.
- Get unsalted nuts, seeds and dried beans.
- Limit salty snacks.
- Don't buy food that lists salt as one of the top four ingredients.
- Try to replace salt with herbs or spices when cooking at home.
- Remove salt from recipes when possible.
- Don't put the salt shaker on the table when you eat.
- Read food labels to identify foods with high salt contents.
- Keep in mind that flavored salts (garlic, onion or seasoned) are not considered salt substitutes because they generally contain as much sodium as salt.