

For a Happy Heart 

# Time to cut down



# ON SALT

INFORMATION ON REDUCING SALT FOR A HEALTHY HEART



## **Salt and heart disease – what happens when you take in more salt than you need?**

People in Ireland are eating too much salt, which is linked to high blood pressure especially as you get older. Blood pressure shows the amount of work that your heart has to do to pump blood around your body. When the pressure inside your blood vessels stays at a high level for a long period of time, it can damage your heart and blood vessels, leading to a heart attack or stroke.

If everyone in Ireland reduced salt intake by a half teaspoon (3 grams per day), this would prevent approximately 900 deaths each year from stroke and heart attack.

The more salt you eat, the more likely you are to retain fluid in your body. Many women have a tendency to ankle swelling, feeling bloated and tightness of their jewellery at the end of the day. Reducing salt in food will help reduce this tendency to swelling.

## **Time to cut down on salt...**

Salt in very small amounts is essential to your health. A little salt is needed for maintaining water balance, healthy blood pressure and for healthy muscles and nerves.

However, many people eat more than twice the amount of salt their bodies need. Research shows that if you eat too much salt in your diet, this can increase blood pressure levels and in turn increase your risk of a heart attack or stroke.

## **What is salt?**

Salt is a nutrient with the name Sodium Chloride. It is the sodium part of salt that causes the problem. Sodium is also found in other forms, for example in baking soda (sodium bicarbonate) for making bread and in a product for curing meats (sodium nitrite/nitrate).



## **Where does this salt come from?**

Most of the salt we eat – about 80% – comes from processed foods, fast food, canteen and restaurant food. About 10-15% is added at home in cooking or at the table and only 5% occurs naturally in food. So to reduce salt in food, you need to use less salt yourself, eat more fresh foods and less snack and processed foods. The food industry also needs to play a role and some food companies are already doing this with clearer labelling and reducing salt in their products.

## So, how little salt should you have each day?

The body needs about 4 grams of salt each day and an acceptable maximum level is 6 grams or 1 teaspoon of salt per day. Many people exceed this level of salt intake and eat on average about 9-10 grams of salt per day.



Children should eat much smaller amounts, depending on their age. School children should eat less than 4 grams per day and younger children should eat only the minimum amount of salt.

Adults: Less than **6 grams of salt or 2.4 grams of sodium** per day  
Children: Less than **4 grams of salt or 1.6 grams of sodium** per day

Remember, most salt in our diet comes from processed foods, fast food, canteen and restaurant food.

## How much salt are you eating?

Check the tables below and see where some of the salt in your diet is coming from. Just one portion of the following favourites can give you as much as two thirds of your 6 grams daily allowance.

| In one average portion of                 | Amount of salt* |
|---|-----------------|
| Instant or cuppa soup (individual sachet) | 2.2g            |
| Tinned soup (200ml)                       | 2.2g            |
| Tinned cook-in sauce                      | 2.4g            |
| Pork sausages (2) grilled (100g)          | 2.4g            |
| Vegetable lasagne (300g)                  | 2.9g            |
| Baked beans in tomato sauce (225g)        | 3.0g            |
| Bacon (2 slices)                          | 3.3g            |
| Deep and crispy pizza (225g)              | 4.1g            |
| Chicken and mushroom pot noodle           | 4.5g            |

The good news is that some equally popular foods contain very little salt.

| In one average portion of                        | Amount of salt* |
|--|-----------------|
| Fresh fruit (1 piece)                            | 0.01g           |
| Fresh or frozen vegetables (unsalted in cooking) | 0.01g           |
| Cream crackers                                   | 0.2g            |
| Weeta-bix type cereal (2)                        | 0.2g            |
| Puffed or shredded wheat                         | trace           |
| Muesli type cereal (35g)                         | 0.08g           |
| Dried fruit such as apricots or raisins (100g)   | trace           |
| Potato (200g)                                    | 0.01g           |
| Instant potato mix (100g)                        | 0.1g            |
| Oven chips (100g)                                | 0.1g            |
| Rice or pasta (plain)                            | 0.06g           |
| Fresh chicken or fish (100-150g)                 | 0.02g           |

It is important to note that some everyday foods have quite high levels of salt, but this does not mean you should cut out these important foods. Manufacturers of these everyday foods are being encouraged to gradually reduce some of the salt levels in these products. You should also compare the labels of different brands as salt levels will vary (see page 8).

| In one average portion of | Amount of salt* |
|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Cornflakes                | 1.0g            |
| Bread (white) per slice   | 0.5g            |

*\* (The values for salt are averages of different brands. Information on salt values of foods listed are provided courtesy of the British Heart Foundation's booklet – Food should be fun...and healthy. For more information see website: [bhf.org.uk](http://bhf.org.uk))*

### **As a guide, the high salt foods you should cut down on are:**

- Packet and tinned soups
- Instant noodles
- Ketchups and sauces
- Sausages and burgers
- Salty savoury snacks

## Imagine drinking a mouthful of seawater? ... Not very nice!

Some of the foods we eat regularly, for example soups, some cereals, bacon and sausages, have the same levels of sodium as seawater. One cup of soup has the same amount of salt as two cups of seawater and one bowl of some cereals contains the same amount of salt as one cup of seawater.

## Simple ways to cut down on salt for you and your family:

- Gradually reduce the amount of salt you add at the table and during cooking.
- Use alternative flavourings such as black pepper, herbs, spices, garlic and lemon juice.
- Limit the use of stock cubes, gravy granules and ready-made sauces, which are all high in salt. Try making homemade stock or sauces instead.
- Choose fresh vegetables and lean meat more often than tinned or processed varieties.
- Try and make home-cooked meals the norm during the week.



(For easy recipe ideas: [www.irishheart.ie](http://www.irishheart.ie); [www.bordbia.ie](http://www.bordbia.ie); [www.bordglas.ie](http://www.bordglas.ie); [www.bim.ie](http://www.bim.ie); [www.safefoodonline.com](http://www.safefoodonline.com)). If you do need to use ready meals on occasion, look for reduced salt options.

- Get out of the habit of having instant high salt foods at home. In fact do not even put them in your shopping basket!
- Children should eat less salt than adults and these guidelines will help you reduce the amount of salt your children will eat. Regular family meals will help encourage your children to eat more fresh foods and home-cooked meals.



## Watch your portion size

To reduce your chances of becoming overweight or obese, the Department of Health and Children is recommending that you should watch your portion sizes of food carefully. This will also help reduce your salt intake, especially if you reduce the portion size of high salt foods.



## Take it slowly

It takes you a number of weeks to change a habit and build it naturally into your lifestyle. The more salty foods you eat, the more your taste buds will be accustomed to salty foods. When you start reducing your own salt intake, foods may taste a little bland at first, but gradually over about 6 weeks your taste buds will adjust and you will get used to less salty foods. You will then start to taste and enjoy the flavours in your food.

If you are feeding babies and young children, you should not add salt to their food. As a result they won't develop a taste or a liking for salty foods.

## Industry's role in reducing salt in foods

You can begin to reduce your own salt intake but to reach the recommended target of less than 6 grams per day would mean avoiding many processed foods, something that is not really practical. Therefore, the food industry needs to play a role. Some food companies are already reducing the salt content of their foods and providing clearer labelling so that you know how much salt or sodium is in the product.

If the food industry continues to make a gradual reduction in salt added to foods, salt intake could be reduced without you even being aware, as a gradual reduction is not detectable by the human palate.

*Vote with your feet – buy food from food companies and retailers that already offer reduced salt products.*

## Supermarket shopping

Take a careful look at your weekly shopping list and gradually stop buying foods high in salt. Some leading Irish supermarket chains have already started lowering the salt added to their own-brand products and are actively encouraging their suppliers to do the same.

### Look at the food label

Food labels can be confusing at the best of times, but even more so when it comes to salt. This is because it is usually the amount of sodium, rather than salt, in grams per 100 grams of the food, that is listed on food labels.

To work out how much salt is in a food, you need to multiply the sodium figure by 2.5.

For example, if a food has one gram of sodium per 100g – that means it has 2.5 grams of salt.



2.5 grams of salt = 1 gram of sodium

Foods high in salt contain 1.5 grams, or more, of salt per 100 grams and at the other end of the scale, foods low in salt contain 0.3 grams, or less, of salt.



Unfortunately at present not all food labels list sodium or salt in the list of ingredients and some do not give the amount of salt or sodium, either per 100 grams of food or per serving. In the near future, new European laws on food labelling will standardise information on food labels, for example, listing the amount of salt. This will make food labels easier to understand for the consumer.

## Eating out

More and more people eat out nowadays – especially informal eating out like takeaways, burgers and fish and chips. It's important to keep in mind that when someone else cooks your food, you do not have control over the amount of salt, fat and sugar they add to it. Try not to add extra salt yourself and try to choose foods that are seasoned with other natural flavourings, for example spices in a curry.



### Top tips for eating out!

1. Always taste food before you add any seasoning.
2. Try freshly ground black pepper instead of adding salt.
3. Choose fresh foods regularly.
4. Cut down on the amount of salty meats you choose such as bacon, gammon and ham.
5. Choose spicy foods when they appear on the menu. With a spicy flavour very little salt is needed. (Look out for sauces that have added soya, increasing the salt level).
6. Try a fruit, vegetable or salad based starter – both light and filling.
7. Ask if the sauce/dressing can be served on the side – you can control how much you wish to use. Look for sauces without added salt, soya, cream or butter. Try tomato, spicy or fruit based sauces instead.



### **What about other types of salt?**

Any form of salt can increase blood pressure. Seasalt, rock salt and garlic salt have the same salt or sodium content as common salt. Salts described as low salt are mixtures of sodium and potassium, where potassium has been added to reduce the sodium content. If you have kidney failure, heart failure or have diabetes you should not use a low salt variety without medical advice.

The best advice to reduce your salt content is to use a variety of alternative flavourings or seasonings to salt, such as black pepper, spices or lemon juice.

## Common sense with salt

- Reduce the amount of salt you use in cooking and at the table.
- Season your food with black pepper, herbs, spices, garlic or lemon juice instead of adding salt.
- Enjoy fresh vegetables, lean meat and home-cooked meals more often.
- Keep convenience ready-meals to a minimum.
- Check the label for salt or sodium content and choose lower salt options.
- Cut down on high salt foods – salty meats, tinned or packet soup and sauces and salted savoury snacks such as crisps.



## And also important for heart health

- Choose at least four or more portions of fruit and vegetables every day.
- Eat less fat, especially saturated fat.
- Eat oily fish (e.g. salmon, mackerel, trout) at least once a week.
- Be more active – for at least 30 minutes most days.
- If you smoke, try to stop. Phone the National Smokers Quitline 1850 201 203 for advice and support.
- Have a regular blood pressure and cholesterol check with your family doctor.



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*or*

**Your local health board**

*or*

**safefood, The Food Safety Promotion Board**

*Helpline:* 1850 404 567

*Web:* [www.safefoodonline.com](http://www.safefoodonline.com)