
Cooking without salt

Description

Sodium is one of the main elements in table salt (NaCl or sodium chloride). It is added to many foods to enhance the flavor. Too much sodium is linked to high blood pressure.

Eating a low-salt diet is an important way to take care of your heart. Most people eat about 3,400 mg of sodium a day. This is about twice as much as the American Heart Association recommends. Most healthy people should have no more than 2,300 mg of salt a day. People over 51 years old, and those who have high blood pressure, may need to limit sodium to 1,500 mg a day or less.

To get down to a healthy level, learn how to trim the excess salt from your diet.

Avoid Prepared Foods

Processed foods make dinner prep easy. But they account for 75% of the sodium in the American diet. This includes:

- Prepared mixes
- Packaged rice dishes
- Soups
- Canned foods
- Frozen meals
- Packaged baked goods
- Fast food

A healthy level of sodium is 140 mg or less per serving. If you use prepared foods, limit sodium by:

- Looking closely at a food's nutrition label for the milligrams of salt per serving. Be sure to note how many servings are in the package.
- Buying products labeled "low-salt," or "no salt added."
- Checking the nutrition labels of cereals, bread, and prepared mixes.
- Rinsing canned beans and vegetables to wash off some of the sodium.
- Using frozen or fresh vegetables in place of canned vegetables.
- Avoiding cured meats like ham and bacon, pickles, olives, and other foods prepared in salt.
- Choosing unsalted brands of nuts and trail mix.

Also, use small amounts of condiments like ketchup, mustard, and soy sauce. Even the low-salt versions are often high in sodium.

Bring on the Fresh Produce

Fruits and vegetables are a great source of flavor and nutrition.

- Plant-based foods -- carrots, spinach, apples, and peaches -- are naturally low in sodium.
- Sun-dried tomatoes, dried mushrooms, cranberries, cherries, and other dried fruits are bursting with flavor. Use them in salads and other dishes to add zest.

Try Salt-free Cooking

Explore cooking with salt substitutes.

- Add a splash of lemon and other citrus fruits, or wine, to soups and other dishes. Or, use them as a marinade for chicken and other meats.
- Avoid onion or garlic salt. Instead, use fresh garlic and onion, or onion and garlic powder.
- Try different types of pepper, including black, white, green, and red.
- Experiment with vinegars (white and red wine, rice wine, balsamic, and others). For the most flavor, add it at the end of cooking time.
- Toasted sesame oil adds a savory flavor without added salt.

Read the labels on spice mixes. Some have added salt.

To add a little heat and spice, try:

- Dry mustard
- Fresh chopped hot peppers
- A sprinkle of paprika, cayenne pepper, or dried hot red pepper

Help Yourself to Herbs and Spices

Herbs and spices provide a mix of flavors. If you are not sure what spices to use, do a taste test. Mix a small pinch of a spice or spice mix into a lump of low-fat cream cheese. Let it sit for an hour or more, then try it and see if you like it.

Try these flavors to liven up your meals without salt.

Herbs and spices on vegetables:

- Carrots -- Cinnamon, cloves, dill, ginger, marjoram, nutmeg, rosemary, sage
- Corn -- Cumin, curry powder, paprika, parsley
- Green beans -- Dill, lemon juice, marjoram, oregano, tarragon, thyme
- Tomatoes -- Basil, bay leaf, dill, marjoram, onion, oregano, parsley, pepper

Herbs and spices on meat:

- Fish -- Curry powder, dill, dry mustard, lemon juice, paprika, pepper
- Chicken -- Poultry seasoning, rosemary, sage, tarragon, thyme
- Pork -- Garlic, onion, sage, pepper, oregano
- Beef -- Marjoram, nutmeg, sage, thyme

Source: Flavor That Food, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

Adjust to Less Salt

You will notice a difference when you first start cooking without salt. Fortunately, your sense of taste will change. After a period of adjustment, most people stop missing salt and start enjoying the other flavors of food.

Salt-free Recipe

There are many great tasting low sodium recipes. Here's one you can try.

Chicken and Spanish Rice

- One cup (240 mL) onions, chopped
- Three fourth cup (180 mL) green peppers
- Two tsp (10 mL) vegetable oil
- One 8-oz (240 g) can tomato sauce*
- One tsp (5 mL) parsley, chopped
- One half tsp (2.5 mL) black pepper
- One and a quarter tsp (6 mL) garlic, minced
- Five cups (1.2 L) cooked brown rice (cooked in unsalted water)
- Three and a half cups (840 mL) chicken breasts, cooked, skin and bone removed, and diced

1. In a large skillet, sauté onions and green peppers in oil for 5 minutes on medium heat.
2. Add tomato sauce and spices. Heat through.
3. Add cooked rice and chicken. Heat through.

*To reduce sodium, use one 4-oz (120 g) can of low-sodium tomato sauce and one 4-oz (120 g) can of regular tomato sauce.

Source: *Your Guide to Lowering Your Blood Pressure with DASH, U.S. Health and Human Services.*

Alternative Names

DASH diet; High blood pressure - DASH; Hypertension - DASH; Low-salt diet - DASH

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