**BLOG**

**Hidden Sodium: The truth about what is keeping you from getting heart healthy.**

So you are finally taking steps to live a healthier, longer life. You’ve been working out more, cutting out trans fats, sugar and fats, eliminating soda from your diet and eating more fresh fruits and vegetables. Your hard work is paying off and people are noticing your outward appearance. But have you given any thought to your sodium intake? You may not be doing enough to lower your risk of [high blood pressure](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/HighBloodPressure/UnderstandYourRiskforHighBloodPressure/Understand-Your-Risk-for-High-Blood-Pressure_UCM_002052_Article.jsp), [coronary heart disease](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/More/MyHeartandStrokeNews/Coronary-Artery-Disease---The-ABCs-of-CAD_UCM_436416_Article.jsp) or [stroke](http://www.strokeassociation.org/STROKEORG/).

Most people think that by cutting out table salt, they are drastically reducing their sodium intake when in fact, they are doing very little. Did you know that up to 75% of the sodium in the average American diet comes from restaurants and processed foods? That’s because salt is used to preserve foods, modify flavor and is included in additives that affect the texture or color of foods.

“Sodium shows up in canned soups, salad dressings, and even products that don’t immediately come to mind when we think of ‘salty’ foods, such as pasta, bread and cereals,” said Rachel Johnson, Ph.D., R.D., a professor of nutrition at the University of Vermont and a volunteer for the [American Heart Association](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/More/MyHeartandStrokeNews/Coronary-Artery-Disease---The-ABCs-of-CAD_UCM_436416_Article.jsp).

The average American gets 3,436 milligrams of sodium per day – more than double the American Heart Association’s recommendation of 1500 milligrams! So what can you do to cut back on sodium without giving up dinner at your favorite restaurants?

1. **Learn to** [**read labels**](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/NutritionCenter/HeartSmartShopping/Reading-Food-Nutrition-Labels_UCM_300132_Article.jsp)**.** Products labeled as “salt free” can still have up to 5 milligrams of sodium per serving. Products labeled “low sodium” cannot exceed 140 mg per serving. A “no salt” or “no sodium” claim does not mean that the product actually is sodium free.
2. **Fresh is best.** When it comes to fruits and vegetables, fresh produce is always your best option and frozen is your second best. But even in frozen vegetables, pay attention to the labels and any added sauces or preservatives. Fresh broccoli is a healthy, sodium free option but frozen broccoli may come with a cheesy or buttery sauce option so watch out!
3. **Be in control.** If you really want a little cheese or butter on your vegetables, it is better to add it yourself than to choose the kind that comes pre-sauced. This way you can control how much you really need.
4. **Know the hidden dangers.** Steamed broccoli, and most restaurant foods in general, usually contains several tablespoons of added butter and seasonings. A lean cut of steak or chicken is frequently brushed with clarified butter to make it look moist. Burgers and sandwiches are brushed with butter before toasting. Ask your server to order it with no butter or seasonings and ask for any sauces on the side so you have more control over your sodium intake. You can do this with most any restaurant foods. Check out the AHA’s [Dining Out](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/NutritionCenter/DiningOut/Dining-Out_UCM_304183_SubHomePage.jsp) guide for more tips on restaurant dining.
5. **Experiment with herbs and spices.** Lemon juice is one of my favorite options on freshly steamed vegetables, fish and chicken. Learn to appreciate the flavors of fresh herbs and spices that don’t contain salt. You’ll be amazed how one or two great herb combinations can really stand out without all the added salt.
6. **Look for the** [**Heart Check Mark**](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/NutritionCenter/HeartSmartShopping/Heart-Check-Mark-Food-Certification_UCM_300133_Article.jsp) **on the label.** The American Heart Association’s red and white icon guarantees that a product meets the association’s sodium requirement of less than 480 milligrams per portion. Use this as a guide when shopping in your local supermarket.

“Whether you’re walking down a grocery store aisle or ordering at your favorite restaurant, there are ways to avoid sodium if you know what to look for,” Johnson said. Check out the American Heart Association’s [low-sodium recipes](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/HighBloodPressure/HighBloodPressureToolsResources/Low-Sodium-Recipes_UCM_306800_Article.jsp) for ideas on how to cut back on sodium in your everyday cooking. Visit our [nutrition center](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/NutritionCenter/HealthyDietGoals/Sodium-Salt-or-Sodium-Chloride_UCM_303290_Article.jsp) for more information about sodium and how to reduce your intake.

**So what are some of your favorite tips to cutting back on sodium?**