# Why Should I Limit Sodium?

You may have been told by your health care professional to reduce the sodium, or salt, in your diet.  Most people eat too much sodium, often without knowing it. Reducing the amount of sodium in your diet can help you lower or avoid high blood pressure.

Your body needs sodium to work properly. It's regulated in the body by your kidneys, and it helps control your body's fluid balance. It also plays a key role in nerve and muscle function.

But too much sodium in your system causes your body to retain (hold onto) water. This may cause puffness, bloating and weight gain.
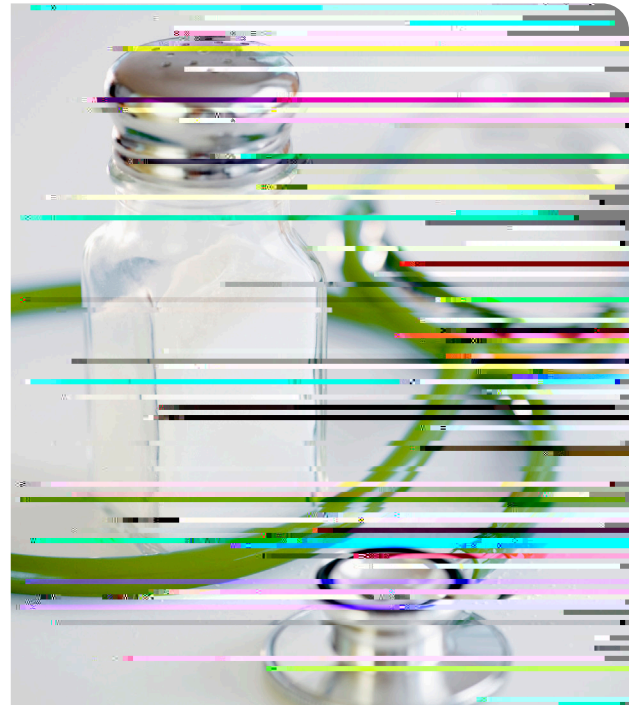
When there's extra sodium in your bloodstream, it pulls water into your blood vessels, increasing the amount of blood inside your blood vessels. With more blood flowing through your blood vessels, blood pressure increases. In some people, this may lead to or raise high blood pressure.

Having  less sodium in your diet may help you lower or avoid high blood pressure, which is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

Nine out of 10 Americans consume too much sodium. The average American eats more than 3,400 milligrams (mg) of sodium a day.

- The American Heart Association recommends no more than 2,300 mg a day and an ideal limit of less than 1,500 mg per day for most adults, especially for those with high blood pressure.
- Even cutting back by 1,000 mg a day can improve blood pressure and heart health.

Many foods in their natural state contain some sodium. But the largest amount of sodium comes from processed, packaged and restaurant foods.

Pay attention to food labels, because they tell how much sodium is in food products. For example: foods with 140 mg or less sodium per serving are considered low in sodium.  Sodium levels of the same type of food can vary widely. Compare the Nutrition Facts labels and select the products with the lowest amount of sodium per serving.

Some over-the-counter and prescription medicines also contain lots of sodium. Ask your health care professional or pharmacist about the sodium in your medicines.  Make reading the labels of all over-the-counter drugs a habit, too.

The best way to reduce sodium is to avoid prepackaged, processed and prepared foods, which tend to be higher in sodium.

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