FN1612

# Sodium

**Abby Gold,** Ph.D., M.P.H., R.D., Nutrition and Wellness Specialist

Will taking the salt shaker away from your dining table help you decrease your sodium consumption? Probably.

However, according to the Institute of Medicine, Americans consume 75 percent of their sodium from processed foods, not from the salt shaker. Therefore, we have unknowingly eaten too much sodium. That raises many questions, such as: Where is sodium hidden? How much sodium is too much? Why should we lower our sodium intake? What is sodium, anyway? This publicationwill try to answer all of those questions, and it gives you a new perspective on this essential nutrient.

## Sodium and Health

Sodium is a chemical element naturally found in our bodies and in the foods we consume in the form of sodium chloride (NaCl), or table salt. Sodium is very important because it regulates fluid balance and generates electrical signals for nerve and muscle functions in our bodies. When we eat too much sodium, our body retains more water to maintain the proper fluid balance, resulting in high blood pressure, or hypertension. When this occurs, sodium does more harm than good to a person's health status.

Cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer and osteoporosis have been linked with high consumption of sodium. Of those, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and cancer are the most common chronic diseases found in North Dakota. Fortunately, numerous studies have shown that decreasing sodium intake slows or even prevents the development of those diseases.

## Dietary Guidelines

*Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010,* which was developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services to help Americans make better health choices, suggests people reduce their daily sodium intake to less than 2,300 milligrams (mg), and those who are 51 and older or those of any age who are African American or have hypertension, diabetes or chronic kidney disease should reduce their intake to 1,500 mg.

You can determine the amount of sodium you are consuming by reading nutrition labels or keeping track of the number of teaspoons of salt you add to foods (1 teaspoon of salt contains 2,300 milligrams of sodium). Other ways to reduce sodium in your diet are to eat more fruits and vegetables, limit processed foods such as ham or frozen dinners, avoid restaurant-prepared foods, prepare homemade meals and use herbs instead of salt to enhance the flavor of the meals. When you are in a grocery store, opt for "low in sodium" or "reduced sodium" products, avoid choosing foods from center aisles because they contain more high-sodium processed foods, and stick to your grocery list that contains more fruits and vegetables.

Sodium is indispensable in maintaining body functions, but when you take in too much, it will disrupt the body's function and cause chronic diseases. Luckily, you have numerous ways to help reduce your sodium intake to the recommended amount. By making more mindful food and beverage choices, we can live more healthful lives.

**For more information on this and other topics, see www.ag.ndsu.edu**



NDSU EXTENSION SERVICE

North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota

Developed 2012 • Reviewed April 2014