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The Dos (and don'ts) of DASH

NUTRITIONISTS OFTEN RECOMMEND A LOW-SODIUM DIET TO HELP REDUCE BLOOD PRESSURE AND OTHER CARDIOVASCULAR RISKS. BUT IT'S NOT THE ONLY MINERAL THAT MATTERS.

BY Diana Kelly Levey

You probably have an inkling that you'll have to cut back on the chips, cheese, red meat, jerky and processed snacks if your doctor tells you that your blood pressure is high. But do you really know why?

When it comes to high blood pressure (hypertension), the American Heart Association (AHA) has long recommended a low-sodium balanced eating plan like the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet as a proven way to help lower blood pressure. DASH limits red meat, sodium (primarily in the form of salt) and added sugars and focuses on produce, low-fat dairy, seeds/nuts, whole grains and lean meats.

"As extra sodium comes into your bloodstream, it takes water and puts it

into blood vessels, which increases the volume of all the blood in your body inside the blood vessels," explains Carlene Thomas, RDN, a nutritionist based in Leesburg, Virginia. This extra volume can raise blood pressure, which puts a burden on both your heart and blood vessels. Over time, this can lead to bigger problems, including stiffening and narrowing of the arteries and damage to your heart, adds Thomas.

But when you reduce the amount of sodium in your diet, as well as focus on other healthy lifestyle changes, you can decrease your blood pressure, creating a positive impact on your heart health. "I think it's easy for a low-sodium diet like DASH to remain a recommendation for heart health because the message to consume less salt is simple for everyone to understand," says Thomas.

"The DASH diet, in particular, has studies to go along with it and it's a very flexible diet. I think that's always why it's remained popular."

The Sodium Controversy

Lately, however, not everyone is embracing the DASH way of eating. People with advanced congestive heart failure really need a low-salt diet, notes Daphne Miller, MD, a family physician based in San Francisco. "But not everyone with hypertension responds. Most of the randomized controlled trials show DASH diets reduced blood pressure on average a couple of points, which is not a big deal, with no change in all-cause mortality."

A 2014 study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*,

for example, followed about 100,000 subjects across 18 countries over a three-year period to see if higher levels of sodium intake were associated with higher blood pressure. Researchers found that if someone had hypertension already, or was older and consumed a higher-sodium diet, they were more likely to show higher blood pressure numbers. But if their potassium intake was also high, they had lower systolic blood pressure readings. Other studies have found that a very-low-sodium diet may adversely affect blood lipids and insulin resistance, thus unexpectedly increasing the risk for heart disease and stroke.

Despite this research, the Institute of Medicine, a key governing body for numerous scientific recommendations, has concluded that a “substantial body of evidence supports the evidence to reduce sodium intake.”

“While a low-sodium diet won’t fix everything for everyone, it is definitely a lifestyle modification that can help,” says Thomas. “You may still need to be on a blood pressure medication

A Day on DASH

Want to give the DASH diet a try? Consider this sample meal plan.

Breakfast

Toasted whole-wheat English muffin topped with 1½ tablespoons of natural peanut butter and banana slices

Snack

6 oz. low-fat Greek yogurt topped with ¾ cup of fresh berries

Lunch

Fresh sliced turkey and low-fat, low-sodium cheese served on whole-grain bread with lettuce and tomato. Add a side salad topped with nuts and an olive oil and vinegar dressing.

Dinner

6-ounce fillet of cod or other white fish served with 1 cup of mashed potatoes, ½ cup green peas and ½ cup of broccoli

Snack

1 banana and ½ cup almonds

or another prescription, but eating a healthier, more whole-foods-based diet can reduce blood pressure.”

Pass on the Packaged Foods

Perhaps the biggest problem in our diet when it comes to the heart isn’t so much the salt that you’re adding to any minimally processed foods, but rather avoiding packaged or processed foods that are already high in sodium, says Nicole Rodriguez, RDN, founder of enjoyfoodenjoylife.com in Long Beach, New York. “That seems to be the bigger culprit. If you’re following a ‘low-sodium diet,’ then you want to avoid a lot of packaged foods and high-sodium ingredients or condiments.”

And that means keeping all packaged and processed foods out of your pantry. “Processed food companies love the low-sodium narrative, because they can continue to sell the same junk but label it low-sodium,” says Miller. On the other hand, flavoring healthful food with a small amount of salt can be a positive. “A high-quality salt sprinkled on at the table can make healthy foods like vegetables much more tasty,” she adds.

It’s still a good idea not to go overboard with the salt shaker. Be mindful of what a quarter of a teaspoon looks like and what a half a teaspoon looks like so you have more awareness of what a “sprinkle” actually is when you’re tallying up your sodium intake for the day.

And keep in mind that it can take some time to adjust to a lower-sodium diet. “At first, eating low sodium may taste bad,” says Thomas. “But over time, your taste buds change and you’ll tolerate low-sodium dishes better. And if you go back to eating a salty dish you used to love, it might even taste too salty for you.”

The Power of Potassium

Sodium and potassium are both minerals known as electrolytes that play a number of key roles in the body,

including helping to maintain fluid and blood volume. The two work hand in hand: Molecular pumps pull potassium into cells while pushing out sodium; this action acts like a battery to power muscle contractions and transmit nerve signals. Both minerals also help in kidney function, energy production and even bone health.

So as important as it is to make sure you’re not taking in too much sodium, you also need to have an adequate amount of potassium. “For overall health, the emphasis shouldn’t be as much on the avoidance of high sodium intake, but to balance your sodium and potassium intake, with an emphasis on the potassium,” says Rodriguez. That’s because your potassium intake can help process sodium out of the body. Eating high-potassium foods helps lower blood pressure by relaxing the blood vessel walls. Good choices include broccoli, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, leafy greens, beans, cantaloupe, avocados, oranges and bananas, as well as low-fat dairy products like yogurt and seafood like salmon.

The Right Stuff

Whether you’re following DASH, any low-sodium diet or simply want to keep an eye on how much salt you’re consuming, you’ll need to practice your label-reading skills to determine how many milligrams of sodium are in a serving, how much of your daily value that is, and how many servings are in the package.

The AHA recommends no more than 2,300 mg of sodium daily for adults or 1,500 mg for an at-risk population. (The average American takes in about 3,400 mg of sodium daily, says Thomas.) To make it easier, the AHA created a Heart Check mark that appears on some food packages that meet the AHA criteria for saturated fat, trans fat and sodium for a single serving of the food product for anyone over the age of 2.



Sneaky Sources of Sodium

Potato chips and pretzels may seem like obvious high-sodium choices, but you can also find this mineral in a number of other foods.

High-Fiber Bread

If you’re trying to help your heart, you’re probably already trying to increase your fiber intake, and one easy way to do this is to switch to high-fiber bread. But read packages, cautions nutritionist Nicole Rodriguez, RDN—you’ll notice that it’s common to find sodium hiding in things like breads. One slice can contain 150 mg of sodium. And low-sodium options aren’t always popular (or palatable).

Pre-Made Seasonings

You probably knew that tacos weren’t a low-sodium food, but you may have attributed that to salty taco shells. The other place you should be looking is taco-seasoning mix. “Store-bought taco seasoning is going to have an enormous amount of sodium, when you could easily make your own with spices in your cabinet and control the amount of salt that goes in,” suggests Rodriguez. Also beware of garlic salt, meat rubs and any seasoning mix you’ll find on the shelf. Look for salt-free options whenever possible.

Jarred Tomato Sauce

An average jarred tomato sauce might have about 400 mg of sodium for a half-cup serving. Remember, if you’re sticking to 1,500 mg daily that’s more than a quarter of your daily intake. A low-sodium jarred sauce contains about 140 mg per serving. To enhance the flavor, add dried herbs and sautéed garlic.

Salad Dressing

Italian and Caesar salad dressings in particular could be sodium bombs. A 2-tablespoon serving might have 350 mg of sodium. Make your own salad dressings at home so you can control the ingredients.

Frozen Veggies in Sauces

Look at any prepared product that’s a ready meal and it’s likely to be high in sodium, Rodriguez points out. Even the veggie-based meals that seem healthy can be high in sodium, so check the labels: One brand’s ¾-cup serving of a frozen broccoli and cheese dish has 430 mg of sodium. You’re better off cooking fresh broccoli and sprinkling on a tablespoon of cheddar cheese for added flavor if desired.

Seltzer

Although this beverage might not contain a lot of sodium—some can have up to 75 mg—if you’re drinking a few cans a day, it can add up.