

## Salt: how to eat less

The World Health Organisation has estimated that if everyone in the world reduced their intake of salt by 2.9g a day, the number of deaths from strokes would reduce by 22% and there would be a 16% reduction in deaths from heart disease.

Dietitian Alison Pask explains why we should eat less salt and how to cut back.

Salt is a compound called sodium chloride, of which about 40% is sodium. Sodium is an essential nutrient as it regulates our water balance, maintains blood volume, controls muscles and nerve function, and helps to maintain our body temperature. Salt is the main source of sodium in our diet. However, we need only tiny amounts. All types of salt contain sodium including table salt, NA<sup>+</sup>, sea salt, rock salt, vegetable salt, MSG or any compound beginning with sodium e.g. sodium bicarbonate.

### Why is salt added to food?

Salt is added for flavour, to preserve food and extend its life, and to stop the growth of bacteria that can cause food poisoning. That's why salty foods like bacon and ham last longer than other meats.

Cheese manufacturers rely on salt to create the correct environment for the cheese-making process. In bread-making the salt controls the yeast fermentation.

### Where does salt in our diet come from?

- > 10% found naturally in food
- > 15% added during cooking
- > 75% in processed and manufactured foods

### What foods are high in salt?

- > Bread, biscuits, cheese, butter
- > Takeaways
- > Snacks e.g. salted nuts, chippies
- > Sauces, soy sauce, gravy powder, stock cubes, yeast extract, packet soups
- > Processed meats e.g. ham, bacon, corned beef
- > Foods containing MSG
- > Pickled vegetables e.g. olives, gherkins.



### Why do we have to cut back?

Salt is linked to high blood pressure in some people, which in turn increases the risk of a stroke, heart attack, and kidney damage.

If you retain fluid, you may find cutting back on your salt intake will help your condition. Discuss this with your doctor.

### How much salt do you need?

You can survive on as little as 200mg of sodium per day but the average diet in New Zealand contains 10-20 times this amount. Sodium occurs naturally in foods, so we don't need to add extra.

The New Zealand Guidelines Group recommends that New Zealanders reduce their sodium intake to less than 2,300mg a day. This is equal to 6g of salt a day, or just over 1 teaspoon of salt.

Iodised salt is the main source of iodine in our diet. Iodine is a mineral needed for making important thyroid hormones. Inadequate iodine intake can result in goitre (an enlarged thyroid gland), among other health effects. New Zealand soils are naturally low in iodine.

Most commercially processed food and takeaways use plain, non-iodised salt so remember to use iodised salt when you do use salt.

## How can you tell how much sodium is in foods?

Sodium is listed on the food packet in the nutrition information panel. You may be surprised to see the difference in sodium levels between different brands.

- > Aim for no more than 2,300mg sodium in total each day.
- > Choose breads and cereals with less than 450mg sodium /100g.
- > Choose spreads with less than 400mg sodium/100g.
- > Limit high salt seasonings such as stock cubes to once per day.

## Preparing food

Be creative with your tastes! To avoid adding salt to meals try the following:

- For a boil up or stew, add onions, garlic, and herbs for extra flavour.

## Reducing salt in Pacific food

*Povi-masima, corned brisket marinated in salt, is a food that increases the risk of obesity and diabetes for many Pacific people. It is fatty and literally thick with salt, and many people eat it every day.*

*Povi-masima is not good for our health.*

*You can still eat some corned beef.*

*Use Wattie's tinned low fat and low salt corned beef instead of the povi-masima.*

*Rachel O'Brien, Diabetes Nurse Educator,  
Pacific Health Wellington*

## TIPS

### 7 tips to reduce your salt intake:

1. Remove the salt shaker from your table. Learn to taste before you shake.
2. Gradually reduce the amount of salt you use in cooking. Research shows manufacturers can reduce the salt content of bread by 10% without changing the taste at all. So small changes over time will have a big impact. It takes about a month for taste buds to adjust to less salt.
3. If using salty ingredients like ham, bacon, stock, soy sauce, olives, anchovies or cheese, **leave out any extra salt.**
4. If your recipe includes salt, start by using **half the amount suggested** in the recipe and work towards reducing it further as the weeks go by.
5. Buy **salt-reduced products** such as salt-reduced stocks, low salt soy sauce e.g. Kikkoman, and low salt tomato sauce.
6. Enhance the flavour of meals with these ingredients instead of salt: **herbs, spices, curry, lemon or lime juice or rind, mustard, chilli, nuts, horseradish, garlic, ginger, pepper or highly flavoured foods** such as pesto, pickles and low sugar sauces.
7. Eat fresh food such as fruit and vegetables, meats, chicken, fish, beans, raw nuts, seeds, and milk products **instead of commercially prepared foods.**

For more on salt check out: [www.stroke.org.nz/stroke-salt-reduction-campaign](http://www.stroke.org.nz/stroke-salt-reduction-campaign)

Diabetes New Zealand is a leading national organisation and registered charity. Our aim is to support all people affected by diabetes to live well through: Providing information and support to help people take charge of their health • Acting as an advocate and representing all people with, or at risk of developing, diabetes • Raising awareness of diabetes, especially around lifestyle factors that can help prevent or delay type 2 and help manage and control type 1 and type 2.