

Live Healthy Georgia – Seniors Taking Charge!

March 2010 Newsletter

Pillar of Salt

By Sarah Peskoe, BA

Salt. We keep it in shakers on the table. It comes in individual packets with our plasticware, and it dusts the tops of our potato chips and crackers. Sometimes we salt food before we even taste it. We even prefer to sprinkle salt on foods that are naturally low in sodium, transforming even fruits such as melon into sodium-containing foods. With sodium being so commonplace, it is easy to forget that it is linked to hypertension and can increase one's risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke.

The average American consumes far more than what is recommended by the Institute of Medicine (part of the National Academy of Sciences). The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends 2,300 mg sodium/day (about 1 tsp of table salt). For specific populations, such as those who are:

- ✓ middle-aged and older,
- ✓ hypertensive, or
- ✓ black,

an intake of only 1,500 mg sodium/day (about 2/3 tsp of table

salt) is the recommendation. According to these criteria, 70% of Americans fall into the lower-intake category.

New York City has already placed a ban on trans fats into effect and is currently turning its attention to reducing sodium. This topic will most likely receive more media attention in the coming months, so stay tuned for those updates.

Interestingly, most of the sodium we consume is not from the shaker; sodium is found in foods at the restaurants where we eat and in the processed foods we purchase at the grocery store. One serving of a popular macaroni and cheese product contains 550 mg, over one-third of a day's allowance.

How can you reduce the sodium you consume? Here are a few tips to seeking out that hidden salt:

- ✗ **Read nutrition labels.** Some companies are making efforts to reduce the sodium in their

products, so keep on the lookout for new items on the shelf that read “low-sodium” or “salt-free.” Even the same foods can vary greatly in their sodium content. Not all canned soups are created equally. The same goes for deli meats, breads, frozen vegetables, processed cheeses, and snack foods such as chips and pretzels. Shop smartly, and check the sodium content of foods.

✘ Um, Waiter?! There’s sodium in my dinner! Many restaurants provide nutrition information. Do not be shy; ask for a nutrition information pamphlet. That information is there for public use, so become an informed consumer. Sometimes, we try and order healthier options by selecting low-fat menu items, but foods can be low in fat yet high in sodium. When you order at a restaurant, avoid sodium-laden condiments like steak sauces, soy sauce, and teriyaki sauce. Many restaurants now provide low-sodium options, but remember to use them sparingly.

✘ Taking your over-the-counter medications with a grain of salt (or two)... Certain antacid medicines and laxatives contain anywhere from 50 mg to 1,000 mg of sodium per dose. Look at the label on the box, and do not be bashful about asking the pharmacist. Above all, do not discontinue a medication without first speaking with your physician.

Salt is an acquired taste, so although limiting salt might be challenging at first, your taste buds will adapt. Our bodies are very adaptable, so give those taste buds a little time to adjust to the new sodium level. By making a conscience effort to reduce sodium intake, you can you can also reduce your risk for high blood pressure, heart attack, and stroke. These illnesses can be debilitating, and the seriousness of this topic cannot be underestimated.

Be your own health advocate, and take care of your body by reducing your sodium intake this month.

More information is available at:
<http://www.eatright.org/About/Videos.aspx>

