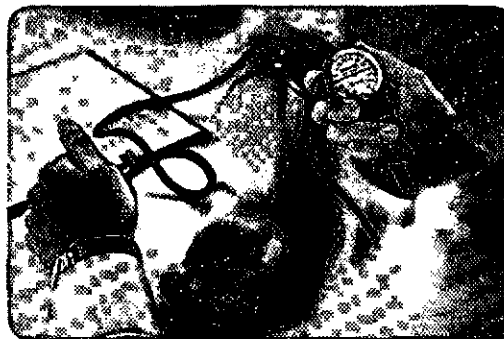


For decades, U.S. and international public health organizations recommended a low-sodium diet to prevent and treat hypertension (HTN) and reduce the risk for cardiovascular disease. Many still do.¹⁸ Yet recently, some organizations have modified their sodium-intake recommendations in response to research suggesting that a low intake of sodium may not benefit the population as a whole and may even increase health risks for some. So who should reduce their sodium intake? Should you? Keeping in mind that nutrition research is always providing new information, let's explore our current understanding of this issue.



The influence of sodium intake on blood pressure is the subject of ongoing research.

How Have Sodium Intake Recommendations Evolved Over Time?

Prior to 2005, the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* used only descriptive phrases, not specific numerical targets, for their sodium intake recommendations. For example, the 1990 recommendation was to "Use salt and sodium only in moderation."¹⁹ In contrast, the 2005, 2010, and 2015–2020 DGAs all recommended a specific sodium intake of less than 2,300 mg per day. The 2015–2020 Guidelines also advise people with prehypertension and HTN to limit their sodium intake to 1,500 mg per day and follow the DASH diet.¹⁸ These recommendations were based on a careful review of available research, including epidemiologic studies, double-blind clinical trials, and community-based interventions.

In 2009 and 2012, however, some public health organizations released recommendations that were lower than those of the DGAs: In 2009, the American Heart Association (AHA) proposed "no more than 1,500 mg of sodium per day" for everyone.²⁰ In 2012, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended a target intake of 2,000 mg per day—300 mg per day lower than the DGA guideline.²¹ Then a 2014 meta-analysis of 25 studies found that a sodium intake between 2,645 and 4,945 mg/day was associated with the lowest mortality risk. The researchers concluded that a sodium intake both lower and higher than these levels was associated with premature mortality.²² As new research becomes available each year, the controversy over sodium guidelines is likely to continue!

Should You Reduce Your Sodium Intake?

Given the uncertainty regarding what level of sodium intake is the most healthful, should you take steps to reduce your sodium intake?

- First, recognize that lifestyle interventions, including food choices, are low-risk, low-cost approaches to preventing chronic diseases and, for people already affected by disease, can be effective treatments. Because most Americans currently consume well above recommended levels, almost everyone would do well to reduce their current intake of sodium by at least 1,000 mg per day.

- Second, the most practical approach is to follow a

healthful dietary pattern. Following the DASH diet or Mediterranean diet can greatly reduce your sodium intake without your having to monitor your milligrams of sodium. These diets have no known health risks; moreover, they will increase your potassium intake, which is known to lower your risk of HTN.

- Third, limit your choice of highly processed foods. Choose fresh foods as much as possible.
- Fourth, remember that the cardiovascular benefits of reducing your sodium intake will be even stronger if you also participate in regular physical activity, maintain a healthful weight, avoid smoking, and drink alcohol only in moderation if you drink at all.¹⁸
- Finally, focus on gradual change. A modest increase in fruit and vegetable intake and regular physical activity along with fewer restaurant and packaged meals can make a significant and lasting impact.

In addition to the steps just described, if you have been diagnosed with HTN and/or have a family history of cardiovascular disease, consult your health care team, including a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN), for help designing a dietary pattern for your needs.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Has reading about the sodium controversy inspired you to try to reduce your sodium intake? Why or why not?
2. The DASH diet recommends increasing your fruit and vegetable intake to 10 servings a day. Would this fit into your current lifestyle? Why or why not?
3. Visit the CDC's "How to Reduce Sodium" web page at http://www.cdc.gov/salt/reduce_sodium_tips.htm. Check out the tips for shopping and eating out. How many of these behaviors do you practice? Which seem practical for you to begin following, and why?