

Americans eat far too much salt, report says For better health, intake should be cut in half

[Kim Severson, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

The nation's leading nutrition panel Wednesday urged Americans to cut their salt intake by almost half, a recommendation nutritionists called a drastic change for a salt-addicted nation.

The report from the national Institute of Medicine cuts back the amount people should eat each day to about a half a teaspoon -- about the amount of salt in 2 cups of Campbell's tomato soup. The panel is considered to be the nation's gold standard for setting nutrition policy and dietary recommendations.

Designed to help Americans get healthier, the recommendations are more than just friendly nutrition advice. They are likely to bring dramatic changes to everything from federally funded school lunches to favorite convenience foods and will be used when the government reworks the national nutrition guidelines. The Food and Drug Administration declined to say how quickly it would update sodium guidelines on labels; changing food labels typically takes several years.

Controlling salt intake could be difficult. Most people's sodium intake doesn't come from the salt shaker but rather from processed foods, salty snacks like chips, restaurant food and salty meats like bacon and ham, Bay Area nutritionists said.

"It'll be interesting to see what people are willing to do," said Carol Porter, director of nutrition and food services at UC San Francisco. "We're so salt-addicted in this country."

As Americans' food intake and portion sizes have continued to rise, so has sodium consumption. Americans already eat plenty more salt than what the government currently recommends, which is 2,400 milligrams, or 2.4 grams, a day. That's a heaping teaspoon. Studies show the average person eats about 4,000 milligrams a day, or just under 2 heaping teaspoons of salt.

The new recommendations urge cutting sodium intake to 1,500 milligrams a day.

Still, Porter said, just getting people to cut back on salt consumption, even if they fall short of the goal, will be a great help in reducing high blood pressure, which in turn will reduce the incidence of heart disease and stroke.

The authors of the report were realistic about the odds of Americans following the new recommendations.

"We don't have our heads in the sand on this one," said Dr. Lawrence Appel, a professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins University and head of the panel. "We realize where we are is quite a distance from where we should be."

Food manufacturers came out loudly against the report, arguing in a press release that the reduced salt levels "are unnecessary and unrealistic for ordinary Americans."

"For most consumers, a low-sodium diet is unrealistic," said Alison Kretser, director of nutrition and scientific policy for the Grocery Manufacturers of America. "Americans can also reduce their risk for high blood pressure by eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables and by choosing low-fat dairy products -- nutritional goals that have health benefits that go far beyond reducing the risk of high blood pressure."

The report does address fruit and vegetable consumption in another section on potassium. Most Americans should eat a lot more potassium -- 4,700 milligrams a day, roughly double current consumption, the report says. Potassium is found in bananas, spinach, cantaloupe and numerous other fruits and vegetables; food sources are better than supplements. Potassium lowers blood pressure and reduces the risk of kidney stones and bone loss.

Joanne Ikeda, a nutritionist at the Center for Weight and Health at UC Berkeley, said the potassium recommendation also would help lower salt intake. The more fruits and vegetables people eat, the fewer salty snacks and processed food they'll rely on.

"It's going to be pretty tough for people to meet this unless they stop eating processed and prepared food and load up on the vegetables and fruits," she said. "I don't think that's going to happen."

In the same report, the institute also suggested that the old adage of trying to drink eight glasses of water was unnecessary. The average healthy person gets plenty of fluid, from beverages as well as the water content of fruits, vegetables and other fluids. Simply drink when you're thirsty, the panelists suggested.

Want to cut the salt?

- Eat more home-cooked meals. Foods cooked from scratch are naturally lower in sodium. You can control how much salt is added.
- Limit amounts of foods with visible salt or foods that taste particularly salty, including nuts, chips and salty meats like ham and bacon.
- Season food with lemon, herbs or vinegar, which can make up for lower amounts of salt.
- Increase the amounts of fruits, vegetables and whole grains in your diet. You'll increase potassium levels, feel fuller and be less likely to reach for salty snacks.
- Avoid processed foods because sodium levels are often much higher than you might expect.
- Don't salt your food before you taste it.
- Tape over a few holes in the salt shaker to slow down those in the family who automatically reach for it.
- Give it time. Research shows it takes about six weeks for your palate to adjust to a lower-salt diet. Once the taste for salt has been tempered, foods that used to taste underseasoned will often taste salty.
- Kim Severson

Sources: UC San Francisco Department of Nutrition and Food Services, the Center for Weight and Health at UC Berkeley

The Associated Press contributed to this report