

Move Over Salt: Expanding Your Flavor Profile

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Salt pervades our every meal and snack as its tiny white crystals lay innocently in the shaker at home, hidden in the food on the grocery store shelf, or creatively incorporated into a restaurant meal. Unfortunately, the appealing flavor combined with the abundant supply can result in an overload of salt into our bodies often with negative consequences. Restoring a healthier sodium balance begins with a basic understanding of salt and then a commitment to change.

Salt, chemically known as sodium chloride, is used extensively by food manufacturers to boost flavor, texture, and color as well as a food preservative. In fact, 77% of our daily salt intake comes from processed and prepared food. During cooking and while eating we shake on another 11 % of our daily salt intake, primarily for flavor. The remaining salt we ingest is found naturally in food with fruits having the least salt followed by vegetables, meat, fish, and eggs. Milk and yogurt are among the highest natural sources of salt or sodium.

Once ingested the sodium portion of salt participates in key bodily functions including regulating blood volume, maintaining acid/base balance, facilitating nerve impulse transmission, and assisting with muscle contraction. These are all commendable functions of salt, ingesting an excess can harm the body. Multiple research studies have linked higher salt intake with higher blood pressure and increased risk of heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease. Plus, excessive salt intake can increase thirst and hunger.

Currently, the average American adult consumes 3, 400 mg of sodium a day (about 1 ½ teaspoons of salt). The recently released 2010 Dietary Guidelines for sodium are divided into two groups of individuals:

- 2, 300 mg sodium (1 teaspoon of salt) for the general population 2 through 50 years of age
- 1, 500 mg (about 2/3 teaspoon of salt) for persons 51 and older and those of any age who are African American or have high blood pressure, diabetes or chronic kidney disease

The food industry, largest contributor of salt to the American diet, is beginning to reformulate products to reduce sodium. Currently, twenty-eight major food companies have joined the National Salt Reduction Initiative (NSRI), in a united nationwide effort to reduce the salt in packaged and restaurant foods by 25% over five years.

In collaboration with the food industry's effort to reduce salt intake, individuals can retrain their taste buds. Tips for retraining taste buds to rely less on the flavor of salt when cooking and eating include

- Replacing sodium-rich seasonings such as soy sauce, ketchup, mustard, barbeque sauce, salad dressing, and prepared dips with lemons, vinegars, citrus fruits, herbs and spices.

- Omit the salt when cooking rice, pasta, and hot cereals.
- Decrease the sodium content of canned beans by rinsing them with cool water after draining.
- Wrap fresh fish in parchment paper or foil to retain natural juices and flavor.
- Seek out salt alternatives such as basil, cumin, ginger, black pepper, onion or garlic powder, coriander, and curry to name a few.
- Add a zing to meat and vegetable dishes with the juice and zest from limes, lemons and oranges.
- For a salt-free flavor boost, oven roast vegetables with a drizzle of olive oil at 400F until tender and browned.
- Heighten the flavor of meats, salads and soups with roasted garlic.

With patience and perseverance, we can modify our flavor preference and ease up on the salt for our health.