

SHAKE THE SALT

Too much salt is bad for you, but cutting down isn't easy. We explain the problems – and what's being done

Even if you never add salt to food, you're still likely to be eating too much, as 75 per cent of the salt we eat hides in processed foods. We need a small amount in our diet to be healthy, but we can get that from unprocessed foods such as fruit and vegetables, where it occurs naturally. Experts say we shouldn't have more than 6g – one teaspoon – of salt a day, but we can quite easily get double that from a normal diet (see table, opposite).

Graham MacGregor, Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine at St George's Hospital, London, is chair of the Blood Pressure Association. He helped to set up Consensus Action on Salt and Health (Cash) in 1996 because he was deeply concerned at the lack of government action to reduce the salt in our diets. Daily salt intakes have been rising steadily, with men now eating around 11g and women 8.1g. 'Reducing average intakes to 6g a day would prevent 35,000 deaths from heart disease and stroke in the UK each year,' he says.

However, some food labels aren't very helpful if you're trying to watch your salt intake. They might give a value only for sodium – a component of salt – or they may give no information at all. We want all food companies to state on the label the amount of salt in their products. If you see a weight for sodium, multiply it by 2.5 to get the amount of salt.

HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM?

More than 16 million people in the UK have high blood pressure (hypertension), which triples your risk of heart disease and stroke. 'Our high salt intake is the major factor putting up blood

pressure,' says Professor MacGregor. Salt causes your body to retain more water, increasing the pressure in your blood vessels, which can lead to high blood pressure. Too much salt is also thought to aggravate asthma and to increase the risk of osteoporosis and stomach cancer.

WHAT'S BEING DONE?

In May 2003 the government's Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition recommended a daily salt target of less than 6g for adults, 3g for four- to six-year-olds, and cuts to the amount in processed foods. The Department of Health (DH) told us that it wants to encourage voluntary changes rather than introducing legislation immediately. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) agrees: 'We're monitoring the industry closely – we have made it very clear that more action is needed and that we will continue to hold it to account,' said a spokesperson.

The FSA and the DH have also launched their Sid the Slug campaign to educate consumers about salt. The FSA told us that, since the start of the campaign, there has been a 27 per cent increase in the number of people who say that the salt content would always affect their decision to buy a product.

Retailers, manufacturers and caterers are starting to reduce the salt content of their foods. The British

FURTHER INFORMATION

Consensus Action on Salt and Health

www.actiononsalt.org.uk

Blood Pressure Association

www.bpassoc.org.uk

020 8772 4994

Food Standards Agency

www.salt.gov.uk

020 7276 8000

Cutting down

- Taste your food first – it may not need extra salt.
- Try to cook meals from scratch, avoiding processed foods and ingredients.
- For more taste, roast vegetables in a drizzle of olive oil rather than boiling them.
- Sprinkle on herbs, or spice things up with a pinch of cayenne pepper or curry powder; and experiment with

garlic, ginger, chilli, lemon and lime.

- A splash of wine makes dishes more interesting.
- Check the label: the FSA classes 1.25g of salt (0.5g of sodium) per 100g of food as 'a lot'. You can print off this information from our handy Which? Food Shoppers' pocket guide (www.which.co.uk).

We each consume this much salt a week – we need to reduce our intake by a third



'People add salt out of habit'

Michael Gill, 66, has high blood pressure. 'When my doctor told me, I wasn't aware that too much salt is harmful,' he says. 'He gave me tablets and told me to cut down on salt, so I stopped adding it to my food and I even cut out my favourite, boiled bacon. The medicine helped, but when I talked to

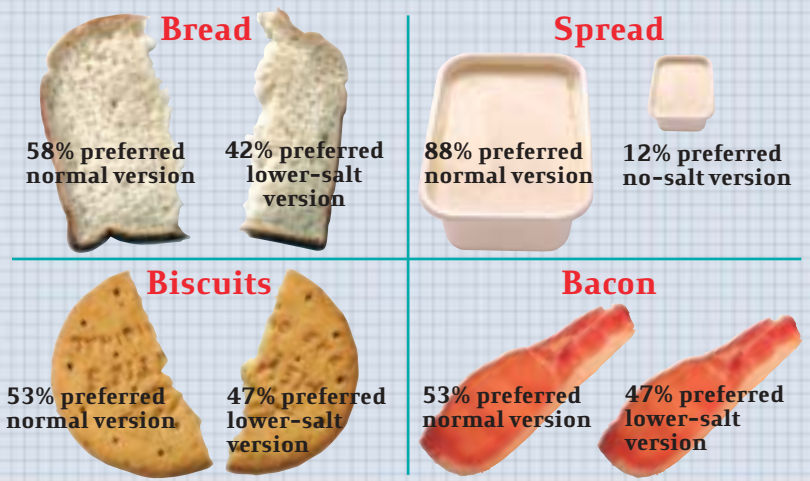
my doctor again I was amazed to discover that I was still eating lots of salt – most of it in processed foods. I also eat out a lot so I don't really know what goes into my food.

'I think there should be colour codes on labels to show which foods are OK to eat. And why is there so much salt in food in the first place? Restaurants and cafés should remove salt from tables – people just add salt out of habit. Hopefully, the next generation won't face the problem of high blood pressure.'



Standard vs low salt: which do you prefer?

When we asked 36 people to taste standard and lower-salt versions of four foods, only with the spread was there a clear-cut preference for the salty version. With the biscuits, they couldn't tell which was which. Interestingly, the order in which people tasted the food made a difference. If they tasted the salted bacon first, for instance, they were much more likely to prefer it: 71 per cent preferred the salty bacon when they tasted it first, only 38 per cent when they tasted it second.



Retail Consortium (BRC), which represents most food retailers, has come up with a five-year plan for salt reduction in nine food categories, with a deadline of 2009. Marks & Spencer and Asda say that they have already made significant progress on their own-brand foods. A Marks & Spencer spokesperson told us: '92 per cent of our ready meals contain less than 3g of salt and a single serving of all our breakfast cereals contains less than 0.7g of salt.' And an Asda spokesperson told us: 'Last year we reduced the salt content of hundreds of foods, and we'll be doing the same in 2005.'

The BRC claims its framework will result in salt reductions of 10 to 25 per cent. But Cash says that the BRC's plans will nowhere near meet the target of less than 6g of salt a day for adults by 2009. For instance, although half of retailers' ready meals will have to contain no more than 3g of salt per serving, the upper limit for the other half is 5g. However, some of the major supermarkets told us that they're not limiting themselves to BRC targets and deadlines.

The Food and Drink Federation (FDF) represents manufacturers. It launched its Project Neptune initiative in 2003. Members such as Heinz and Premier Foods (makers of the Crosse & Blackwell and Loyd Grossman ranges) agreed to cut salt levels in soups and sauces by 10 per cent each year for 2003, 2004 and 2005. In 2003, members reduced the salt in soups by an average 6 per cent and in sauces by 20 per cent. The FDF is also encouraging members to label salt as well as sodium.

The government wants caterers on board, too. The British Hospitality Association and the British Beer and Pub Association have sent out 65,000 leaflets recommending that caterers 'add little or no salt during the preparation and cooking stages'.

Salt content in a sample daily diet

The recommended daily salt target for adults is less than 6g but, in this sample daily diet, containing lots of processed foods, the total for the day – 13.6g – adds up to more than double the recommended amount. The dinner alone contains a massive 6.5g of salt.

Meal	Food	Salt (sodium)
Breakfast	Two slices Hovis Farmhouse white bread, Country Life butter and Marmite	2.6g (1g)
Snack	30g bag of Quaker cheese-flavour Snack-a-jacks and an apple	0.8g (0.3g)
Lunch	Pret a Manger Big Roast Beef sandwich, a banana, and a Toffee Crisp	3.7g (1.5g)
Dinner	Three Asda thick pork sausages, Ainsley Harriott Tomato Tango cous cous, and a small can of Heinz baked beans	6.5g (2.6g)
Total		13.6g (5.4g)

A MATTER OF TASTE

Liking salty food is just a habit. Whether you've got a salty palate depends on how much salt you eat. Our taste buds take only two to three weeks to adjust to a less salty taste, but there's general agreement that drastic salt cuts can't happen overnight – if they did, food would taste bland and people might not buy it. Dr Emma Fluck, Project Co-ordinator for Cash, told us: 'Our taste buds can detect a change in salt concentration of more than 10 to 15 per cent, so any action needs to be gradual and sustained.'

The more we demand lower-salt products, the more industry will respond. Supermarkets told us that the salt cuts are going down well with customers: comments so far have been favourable.