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[Don't] pass the salt

Salt has a long history as a highly-valued commodity. One of its key uses, dating back centuries, has been in preserving foods, including meat, fish, vegetables and even fruit. Salting foods prevented spoiling by drawing water out of the food, depriving bacteria of the moisture needed to thrive. Without salt, the world's food supply would have been considerably less plentiful and less safe. The trouble is, our taste for it may be killing us!

Think of sodium and you think 'salt'. However, although to most of us the words are interchangeable, they are different - salt (sodium chloride) is composed of 40% sodium and 60% chloride by weight. One 5g teaspoon of salt contains about 2,300 milligrams of sodium.

Sodium is good. It's essential for life and good health. And it's a mineral that the body cannot manufacture itself so it must be supplied by food - either from foods which contain it naturally, or from foods where salt is an ingredient or from salt added during cooking. Sodium gives food flavour as well.

The problem we face, however, is simple: compared to other minerals, the human body needs sodium in relatively large amounts but most of us consume far more than our requirement. That's bad because of the link between high sodium and salt intake and high blood pressure - a major risk factor for heart disease, stroke and kidney disease.

Why do we eat so much of it? It's easy to see how it used to be an integral part of our diet - until a couple of hundred years ago, salting was the primary method available for preserving foods. A salty taste in food was common and accepted. But as other food preserving methods evolved such as refrigeration and canning evolved, the need for salt diminished.

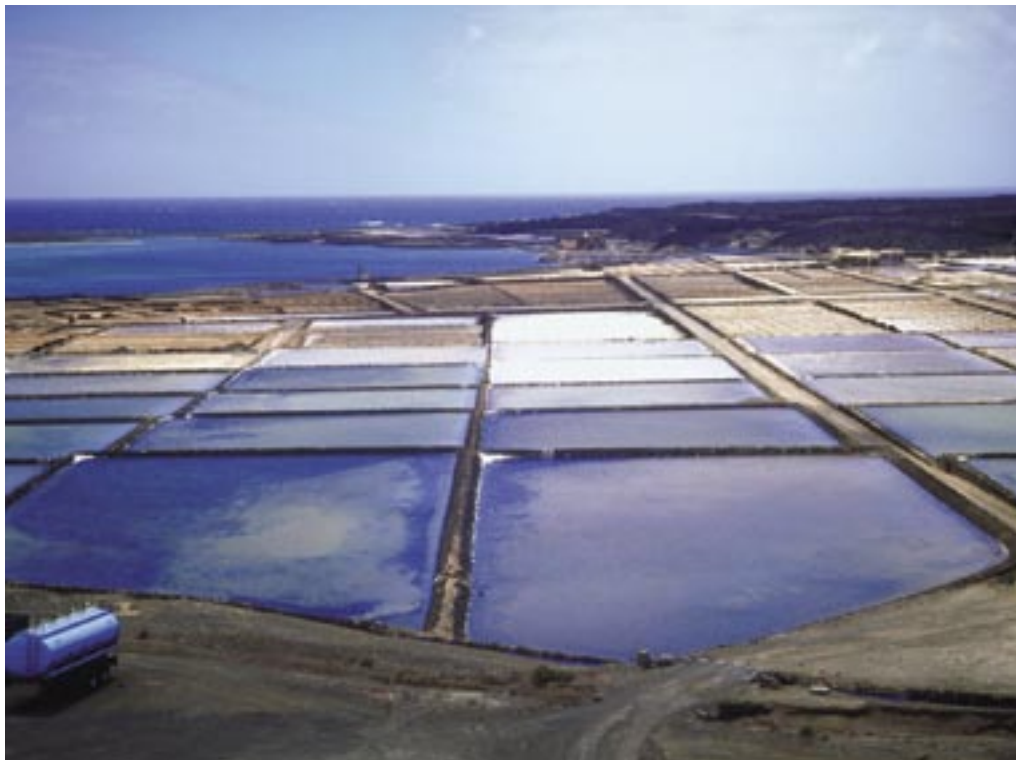
But our taste for it remained. It enhances the flavour of food but does more as well. Salty is one of the five basic tastes, along with sweet, sour, bitter and umami. However, unlike the other four tastes, which have many triggers, only sodium chloride is associated with the unique taste of saltiness. And although the preference for salty flavour appears to be innate, there is evidence that the level of salt preference is learned. In fact, early experiences with low or high salt diets may have a long-term impact on an individual's preferred salt level - important to remember if you have kids.

So good, it's bad

The danger sodium presents to us comes, ironically, from its benefit - it inhibits the growth of bacteria, yeasts and molds, so helping to prevent food spoilage and food-related illness. Foods most commonly preserved with salt and sodium include cured, ready-to-eat meats and processed cheese products. And other foods also use salt as a means of preventing spoilage - natural cheeses contain salt, which helps prevent growth of yeasts and molds; salad dressings include salt to prevent the growth of spoilage bacteria, yeasts and molds; fermented foods, such as pickles, use salt to suppress the growth of spoilage organisms; and both butter and cheese have salt added for enhanced flavour and longer life.

It's also commonly added to bread to help control the fermentation of the yeasts and strengthen the gluten, resulting in a more uniform grain and texture.

And so on. In fact, sodium or salt are present



Removing 2-3g of salt from your daily diet can reduce your risk of a heart attack by 50% and a stroke by 25%.

Watch that salad!

A recent survey in the UK by CASH (Consensus Action on Salt and Health) found that some lunchtime salads and pre-packed pasta meals contain more salt than a hamburger and chips. They should carry a health warning, says the group.

Problems come from the use of salty ingredients such as bacon, ham or cheese, as well as in salad dressing which can contain up to 1g of salt per serving. The McDonald's low-fat Caesar dressing, for example, was found to contain 2.7g of salt per 100g, in the survey.

CASH urged companies to include full nutritional information, including details of salt content. It pointed out the danger of hidden salt in meals which consumers may perceive as healthy choices.

in so many foods that it's easy to ingest an unhealthy quantity in a day. And, although sodium is an essential mineral that the body requires to maintain health, sodium deficiency is relatively uncommon. When sodium intake is low, the body conserves it by reducing the amount excreted through urine and sweat.

So what is a healthy sodium requirement? Scientists generally agree that Adequate Intake (AI) should be 1,500 milligrams of sodium per day (3,800 milligrams of salt). This is the minimum amount of sodium needed for a diet adequate in other essential nutrients and to replace sodium lost daily through perspiration for individuals engaged in recommended levels of physical activity.

The average US citizen currently consumes more than double that recommended amount, as will anyone who follows a basic Western, processed diet, although our hot and humid climate in the Middle East may require more than recommended levels to account for increased sodium loss through perspiration.

As well as a recommended amount, there's also a maximum level for daily sodium consumption, known as the Tolerable Upper Intake Level (UL). For healthy individuals in middle age this represents 2,300 milligrams per day (5,800 milligrams of salt).

The implication of all this? Reduce your sodium intake to less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day and reduce it even more if you suffer from hypertension, diabetes and kidney disease. There doesn't appear to be a direct link between body weight and daily sodium requirements, but body weight is known to increase hypertension...

At present, it's estimated that about 77% of the total sodium consumed by Americans is added to foods during processing, while 6% is added while eating, 5% added during cooking and less than 1% is consumed from tap water. Only about 12% of the total salt consumed is naturally occurring, coming from milk, meat, poultry, shellfish, vegetables, bottled water and tap water.

Cut it out!

Here are some simple tips for starting to alter your diet choices:

- Increase your intake of foods rich in potassium, magnesium and calcium, as well as protein and fibre, as you reduce sodium intake. This will lower your blood pressure.
- Choose foods low in saturated fat, cholesterol and total fat.
- Eat lots of fruit and vegetables, Try for eight servings a day.
- Increase low-fat or fat-free dairy products and reduce intake of full-fat.
- Eat more fresh foods and fewer processed.
- Switch to whole grain foods.
- Aim for four or five servings of nuts, seeds and dry beans a week.
- Cut back on sweets and sugar.

The reality of healthy eating is that everything is linked. Blood pressure is caused by stress and increases it, and so on. Just cutting salt out of an unhealthy diet may be a good thing, but you also need to tackle other unhealthy elements - too much sugar, not enough fibre, etc.

Remember that the level of your preference for salty flavours is an acquired taste. Making a change may seem hard as foods will no longer have the same flavour, but reducing salt and sodium whilst increasing other ingredients and seasonings to enhance flavor will help. As you decrease salty flavours, so will your desire for them decrease as your taste buds become accustomed to less salt.

Studies have demonstrated that a gradual reduction in sodium intake over eight to 12 weeks can decrease preference for salty foods and increase acceptance of foods with less sodium.



Which salt?

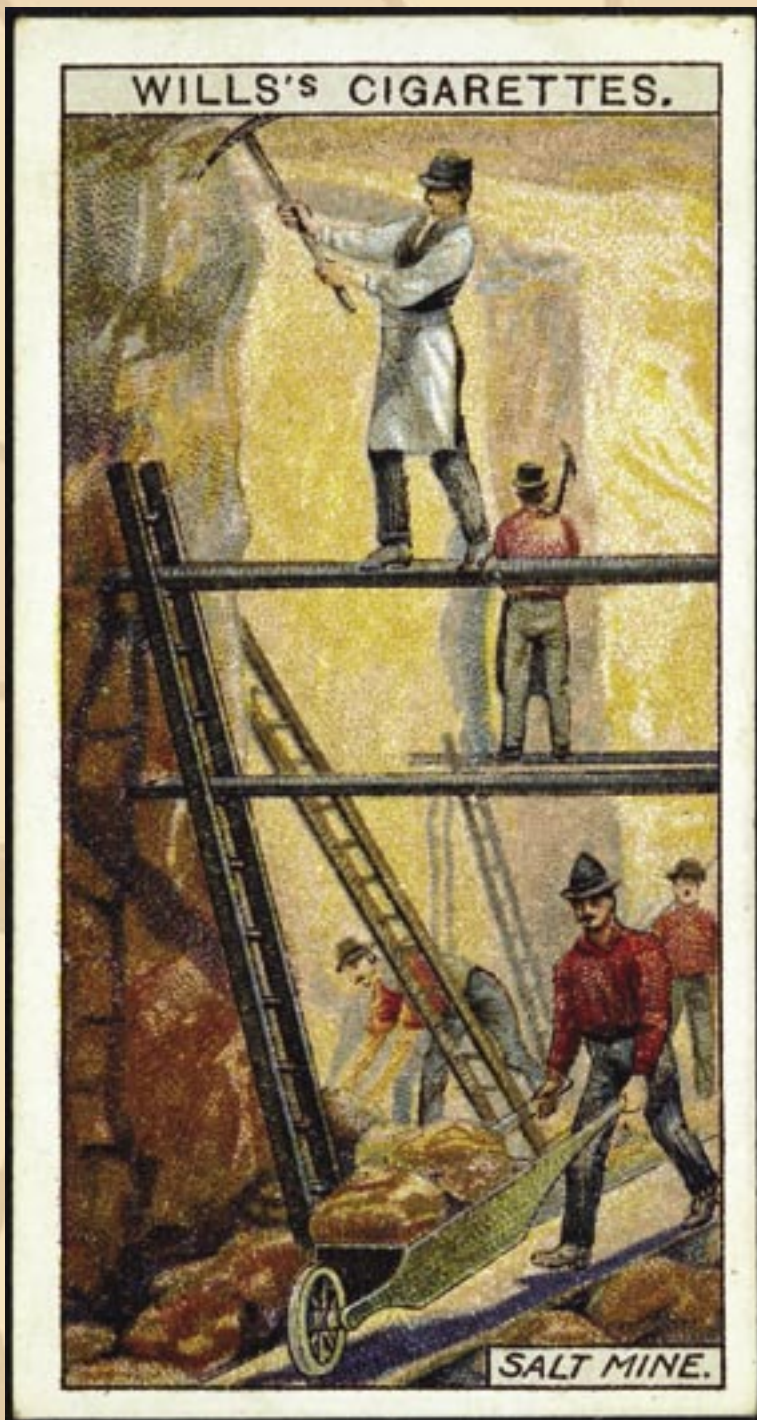
Just to confuse, salt is available in various crystal sizes and shapes, each with different purposes:

- Table salt - fine-grained and free-flowing, available iodised or non-iodised.
- Kosher salt - no additives and coarse grain. Gourmet cooks often prefer the texture and flavor of kosher salt in cooking.
- Sea salt - fine or coarse grain with a slightly different taste caused by other minerals it contains.
- Pickling salt - fine-grained used for brines to make pickles.
- Seasoned salt - a salt blend that includes herbs and other seasonings.
- Salt substitutes - light salts that typically replace all or some of the sodium with another mineral, such as potassium or magnesium.
- Rock salt - non-food salt used as a de-icing agent.



Look out for salt when shopping.

Source: UK Food Standards Agency.



Nils' notes

Every issue, Nils El Accad, CEO of Organic Foods & Café, looks at healthy eating from an organic perspective.

Like everything, organic foods are subject to misconceptions. The most common one is perhaps this: if it's organic, then it's good for you.

Well, it may be but the laws of science and nature do not take a holiday just because your food has been grown or raised in a certain way. Organic foods should certainly taste better. They are almost certainly better for you because of the lack of chemical additives. And you should get more satisfaction from them knowing the lesser impact on the planet.

But eating organic doesn't mean you shouldn't still be aware of general health concerns - one of the major ones being, of course, levels of salt in our diet.

You don't need me to rehearse the dangers of excess salt - high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes and so on. The problem, however, is that as any chef knows, salt makes food taste good! I believe you'll taste your food more if you go organic, but even then you need to be careful about added sodium in canned or bottled organic goods.

As with any shopping for food, read the label!

An important point to understand is that there's no one thing called 'salt' - it comes in many forms, as you can see in the box on the previous page. My general belief is that the least processed food is the best, so I would always recommend sea salt, rock salt and herb salts over the more common table salt. Rock salts are better as they have avoid the pollution that is now unfortunately in the sea, but it can be hard to find the right one. And don't forget Himalaya salts and Ayurvedic salts - they're really great!

Of course, when calculating salt intake it's the total amount that's critical, not the sodium content of any one food. But get into the habit of looking at food labels and understanding how different prepared foods are lower in sodium, including many reduced-sodium

and no-salt-added versions.

And, when eating, keep salt off the table! Instead, wake up your tastebuds with loads of tasty organic veg and fruit - it tastes healthy!

Here's some good tips too for reducing salt in your diet:

- Reduce traditional foods with modified versions - 'low in sodium', 'reduced sodium' or 'lower sodium' are the phrases to look for on labels.
- If you have favourite higher-sodium foods, then balance them with fresh foods that are naturally low in sodium.
- Eat smaller portions of higher-sodium foods.
- When cooking, reduce or omit the amount of salt. For casseroles and stews, it won't make much difference, for example. Use herbs instead to add flavour and interest
- Rinse canned foods, such as vegetables or legumes, before cooking to help reduce the sodium content.
- Using salt to preserve is an old technique and the best way to use the product after is to soak it and throw out the water
- Finally, a hidden salt trap! Many medications can contain large amounts of sodium, such as certain antacids, laxatives and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. Check the label or ask your pharmacist.

And, remember: eat healthy!

77% of our salt intake is from processed foods.



Where food tastes the way it used to...

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