

Salt and Black People of African Descent

Introduction

Salt has many detrimental effects on health and is considered one of the most important risk factors for high blood pressure, the consequence of which is increasing the risk of heart attacks, strokes and heart failure.

Many people from ethnic minorities living in the UK, including black people of African descent (accounting for around 2% of the total population in the UK ¹) are particularly sensitive to the effects of too much salt and are therefore at higher risk of associated health conditions such as stroke and renal failure.

The effect of salt

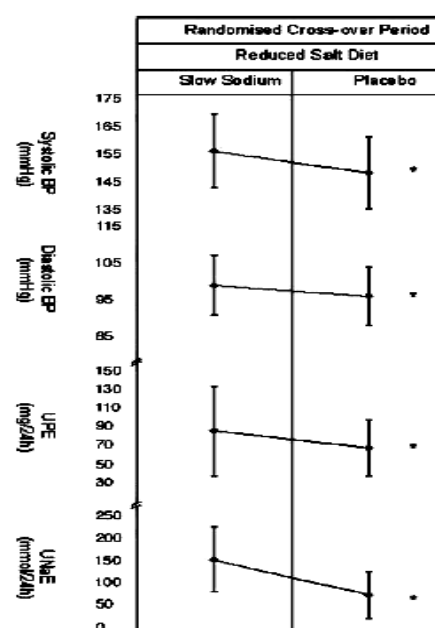
There is evidence to show that black people of African descent living in the UK are three to four times more likely to have high blood pressure compared to white populations in the UK.²⁻⁴ They have also been shown to have double the stroke mortality compared to the UK general population⁵ as well as an increased risk of end stage renal failure⁵ both of which can be caused by high blood pressure.

A number of studies⁷⁻⁹ including the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) study, have shown that reducing salt intake can lower blood pressure to a greater extent in the black population compared with the white population. Another study¹⁰ demonstrated that a modest reduction in salt intake (from around 10g to 5g of salt per day) in black patients with high blood pressure resulted in both a fall in blood pressure (the major risk factor for cardiovascular disease) and urinary protein excretion (the major risk factor for renal disease and an independent risk factor for cardiovascular mortality). The fall in BP with salt reduction is equivalent to that seen with single drug treatment. It has been predicted that reducing salt intake from the current levels to 6g a day in black people of African descent could reduce their risk of a stroke by 45% and heart disease by 35%.¹¹

Current salt intake

Almost everyone in the UK (and the rest of the Western world) eats too much salt. The daily recommended amount in the UK is no more than 6 grams a day; the current average salt intake is 8.6g salt a day although many people are eating more than this. People with or considered at risk of high blood pressure should take extra care to ensure that they keep their salt intake below the recommended maximum of 6g.

The majority of salt consumed by people of black African descent is from salt added in cooking and/or at the table. This is in contrast to the rest of the UK population (and indeed the Western world) where 75% of salt intake comes from processed foods. A health survey in England¹² found that 83% of black men and 85% of black women added salt in cooking. Over a quarter (28%) of the same population add salt at the table. Salted meats and fish like salt-fish and salt-beef, and heavily seasoned meats such as fried chicken, stews and curries can contain a lot of salt.



BP Blood pressure UPE Urinary Protein UNaE Urinary Sodium

Figure 1 - the effect of modest salt reduction on on BP and urine protein excretion in black hypertensives. Source: Swift et al, 2005¹⁰

Dietary advice

By using the advice below, people of black African descent can help to reduce their risk of getting high blood pressure or if they already have high blood pressure, help lower their blood pressure. Remember the daily recommendation is a maximum of 6g of salt per day.

- Sea salt, rock salt and garlic salt are just as bad for your health as table salt and should be avoided
- When cooking, salt should not be added to the water used for cooking vegetables, pasta and rice
- Instead of salt other flavourings such as fresh herbs, spices (but not prepared spice mixes which often contain added salt), lemon juice and wine should be used
- When buying processed foods lower salt alternatives should be chosen
- Look out for words on labels like sodium, salt, brine, cured, pickled, corned, smoked on labels - and only eat limited amounts of these products
- Any salted meat or fish e.g. salt fish, salted mackerel, saltbeef, khobi, salted pigs tail should be soaked in water for 24 hours (changing the water a number of times) to remove most of the salt before cooking. Better still, eat fresh unsalted meat or fish

To further reduce the risk of getting high blood pressure, heart disease and strokes people should make sure they eat at least 5 portions of fruit/vegetables per day, increase the amount of exercise they do (at least 30 minutes, 5 times a week) and reduce the amount of saturated fat they eat. It is important to try and lose weight if overweight, and also to stop smoking.

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