

Salt and Women's Health



Salt can damage your health. Too much salt puts up our blood pressure which can lead to a number of serious health conditions.

What is salt?

Salt is a substance made up of sodium and chloride. Both are essential for life but in very low quantities. Sodium chloride has excellent preservative properties and is commonly used in foods to extend shelf life. However, since the introduction of canning and refrigeration the need for salt to keep food fresh has reduced. Salt is now, all too often, added unnecessarily to our food by food companies as a cheap way to add flavour and bulk to meat. This has led to us eating a lot more salt than we need and becoming accustomed to the taste.

What effect does too much salt have?

Too much salt causes our body to retain water which increases our blood pressure. Raised blood pressure leads to cardiovascular disease and is the biggest cause of death in the UK through the strokes and heart attacks it causes. High blood pressure (hypertension) is defined as over 140/90 mmHg.

Reducing salt intake by 1g per day is predicted to save 6,000 lives each year in the UK and reducing salt to the recommended limit of 6g is predicted to save 17,500 lives.

A high salt diet has also been linked to stomach cancer, osteoporosis, kidney disease, obesity and bloating/water retention. Osteoporosis and bloating are particular problems for women.

Osteoporosis and Bloating

Osteoporosis is a condition whereby bones become thinner, increasing the risk of fracture. Salt intake is the major factor controlling calcium balance. Too much salt causes calcium to be leached from the bones resulting in bone weakening and ultimately fracture.

Bloating is caused by water retention which is increased by a high salt diet. Many people with water retention, including women with premenstrual water retention, find considerable improvement in their symptoms by reducing their salt intake.

Which foods contain salt?

Three quarters of the salt we eat is hidden in the prepared foods that we buy, rather than added in cooking and at the table. White bread is the biggest individual source of salt in women's diet, making up 10% of total salt intake.

A lot of the foods which contain salt are surprising, for example:

- Breakfast cereals
- Sauces
- Ready meals
- Processed meat
- Soups
- Sandwiches
- Snacks

The good news is that with simple changes to your diet you can reduce your salt intake and therefore your blood pressure and other symptoms. Checking product labels and choosing low salt options as well as avoiding processed foods in favour of cooking at home are easy ways to reduce your salt intake.

Reducing your intake of high salt foods, particularly processed foods which contain a lot of hidden salt, can really help you to reduce your risk of stomach cancer.

Currently the average salt intake in the UK is 8.1g per day; much higher than the daily recommended maximum limit of 6g!



Top tips

- Don't add salt when cooking or at the table; it will only take a couple of weeks for you to adjust to the taste
- Use different flavours, including garlic, lemon, chili and fresh herbs to replace salt when cooking
- High salt foods such as cured meat, cheese, pickles and table sauces should be eaten in moderation
- Did you know that most (75%) of the salt you eat is hidden in processed foods? Check labels of products such as bread, cereal, soup, sauces and meat products and choose lower salt options