

Getting salt savvy



Picture: Getty Image

Does it enhance food flavour or bring you a step closer to disease? MONICA VIDENIEKS looks at salt.

Whether you pop a pinch in your cooking, sprinkle it on your dinner or eat your fair share of processed and take-away foods, chances are you're eating way too much salt.

Consider that an adult's daily recommended intake of salt (sodium) is 2,300mg — just 1 teaspoon — and you'll understand why.

Salt, linked with hypertension (high blood pressure), kidney disease, stroke and other cardiovascular issues, has the health experts sounding the alarm bells that most of us, including our children, are eating too much.

The Heart Foundation estimates the majority of the salt we eat — as much as 75 per

cent — comes from processed foods. And some of the saltiest foods actually don't even taste salty.

WA Heart Foundation dietitian Emma Groves says salt is deceptive because food labels can be confusing to understand and it is rife in ready-to-eat foods; and many consumers are oblivious.

"We're eating far too much salt," Ms Groves says.

"The problem with salt is that it causes hypertension which is high blood pressure and that is linked to a lot of serious health problems; and overtime these can lead to bigger issues like kidney disease and cardiovascular problems."

And children are at just as

much risk with parents unwittingly buying easy, pre-prepared lunchbox fillers like sweet biscuits and crackers not realising they are high in salt. Add to this that a quarter of Australian children are overweight and obese — and at increased risk of high blood pressure — and the health threat of salt looms over children too.

"So many of us are looking out for sugar and fats in the foods we eat and yet salt is there, like a hidden threat," Ms Groves says.

She warns that takeaways and convenience food are often notoriously high in salt.

“About 75 per cent of our salt intake comes from processed foods like takeaways — a ham and pineapple pizza or a meat-lovers pizza could have as much as 2400mg of salt in it — and if you eat that whole pizza entirely to yourself, you’ve eaten your entire day’s salt intake in one sitting,” Ms Groves says.

Margaret Hays, practising dietitian and spokesperson for the Dietitians Association of Australia, says to watch for other deceptively high-salt foods like corn variety breakfast cereals, breads and packaged sweet bakery items.

“It is so easy for people to blow out their salt intake,” she tells Mind+Body.

“I don’t think people understand how much they are allowed, how to read the food labels to see how much salt they are actually eating and as a result, people are eating a lot more salt than they should.”

Ms Hays points out the body (taste buds) has a taste threshold where it gets used to the saltiness — and will expect it. The more salt you eat, the more you’ll crave.

“You can definitely wind this back though,” reveals Ms Hays.

“For a start, when your meal is in front of you, don’t automatically put salt on it without tasting it first and have other condiments on hand for

flavour — rather than just salt. Try herbs and spices and dried chilli flakes.”

When shopping, go for tinned products that are no added salt or reduced salt, and instantly you are having less.

Labels can be tricky to read, but as a rule the sodium per 100g (on the food’s nutrition label) should be less than 400g, ideally less than 120g. Keep in mind that listed ingredients like baking soda and MSG are salt too — but these are often listed separate to the sodium on an ingredients label.

BREAKING THE SALT SCALES

This daily eating plan may look familiar to you — but it also blows an adult’s daily recommended salt intake by lunchtime:

Breakfast: Cornflakes, with toast with peanut butter.

Morning tea: Crackers with cheese.

Lunch: Take away stir-fry (in marinade and topped with soy sauce).

Afternoon tea: Packaged soup.

Dinner: Pre-packed pasta meal.

“It is pretty easy to blow the salt intake — anything packaged and processed with usually have a higher salt content,” warns Ms Hays.

HOW MUCH SALT AM I ALLOWED?

Children

1-3 1,000 mg/day

4-8 1,400 mg/day

9-13 2,000 mg/day

14y +

(includes adult men and women):
2,300mg/day — equivalent to a teaspoon.

Source: *Nutrient Reference Values for Australia*

HOW TO READ SALT ON A FOOD LABEL

- Look for the sodium content (per 100g) on the nutrition label on packaged processed foods.
- Low sodium is less than 120mg. Aim to always stick to less than 400mg per 100g.
- Compare products and their salt content by using the 100g column.
- Before reading the nutrition labels, check to see if there are any no added salt or reduced salt versions of the product first (for example baked beans and tinned vegetables).

PICK A BETTER SNACK

- Swap a doughnut 250mg for an apple 3mg
- Swap one handful of mixed nuts (salted) 140mg for mixed nuts (unsalted) 1mg

Watch out for: crackers and rice cakes – often around 200mg of salt a serve

Source: WA Heart Foundation

IS FANCY SALT BETTER FOR YOU?

"It doesn't matter what salt you use," says Margaret Hays, accredited practising dietitian and spokeswoman for the Dietitians Association of Australia. "If it's Himalayan pink salt or flakes or whatever; it is still salt."

SALTY SWAPS

Try this switching menu and see how much less salt you can eat

Breakfast			
Toast with butter and vegemite	720mg	Porridge made with oats, milk and fresh fruit	100mg
Toast with butter and regular baked beans	1000mg	Weetbix with yoghurt and fruit	200mg
Lunch			
Ham and cheese sandwich	1200mg	Boiled egg, avocado and salad sandwich	600mg
Can of supermarket soup, chicken and corn	1500mg	Home-made soup using less salt e.g. https://livelighter.com.au/Recipe/533/sweet-potato-and-lentil-soup-3-2-1	627mg
Dinner			
Take-away burger and chips	1500mg	Chicken breast seasoned with lemon and herbs, salad and roast sweet potato	100mg
Shepherds pie made with supermarket flavouring sachet	550g	Homemade shepherds pie e.g. http://www.donttrustyourtastebuds.com.au/shepherds-pie/	117mg
Take-away pad Thai	1100mg	Home-made beef stir-fry with garlic, ginger, chilli and fresh coriander, brown rice, vegetables	100mg

Source: WA Heart Foundation

HIGH SALT SHOCKERS

Deli meats (ham, salami) – 50g serve 700mg

Take-away foods

- Meat-lovers pizza – 2 slices 800mg
- Burger and chips 1500mg
- Sausage roll 900mg
- Pad Thai 1100mg

Sweet things

Blueberry muffin 400mg

Sauces/condiments

- Soy sauce 1 tbsp 1300mg
- Tomato sauce 1 tbsp 200mg
- Teriyaki marinade 1 cup 6300mg
- Italian/French salad dressing 1 tbsp 200mg

SOURCE: WA HEART FOUNDATION