

Sodium in unexpected places

November 19 2021, by Barbara Intermill



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A patient with diabetes and heart disease told me he hardly uses salt. "I do buy more convenience foods since my wife died, though," he continued. That's an issue, according to new guidance to food manufacturers from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Citing that more than 70% of the [sodium](#) we ingest resides in packaged or restaurant foods—before we ever pick up the salt shaker—the FDA recently asked food processors to gradually reduce the amount of sodium in their products. (Note: Salt is a combination of sodium and chloride. It's the sodium part of this popular seasoning we're discussing now.)

Sodium is not all bad. It enhances flavors and helps preserve food from spoilage. And it's an essential nutrient for the body to maintain the right balance of fluids.

It's our current obsession with excess salt that has health experts worried. Diseases like osteoporosis (excess sodium can leach calcium from the bones) and [high blood pressure](#) are all related to a diet too high in sodium.

And high blood pressure is nothing to ignore, says the American Heart Association (AHA). Too much sodium pulls extra water into the blood, which makes the heart work harder to pump nutrients and oxygen through the body. Like a garden hose under pressure, over time, the walls of blood vessels can stretch and get damaged. This, says the AHA, can lead to a stroke or other diseases of the heart.

An adequate intake of sodium is 1,500 milligrams a day for anyone over the age of 19, says the National Academy of Sciences. Yet we Americans typically consume more than double that amount, an estimated 3,400 milligrams. The current goal of the FDA and Dietary Guidelines for Americans is somewhere in the middle—no more than 2,300 milligrams a day.

So...until food companies figure out how to cut sodium in their products, we need to be vigilant about what we throw into our grocery carts. Packaged and convenience foods are a good place to start—even those we tend to think of as "healthy."

Take a look at meat substitutes, for example. Compared to 75 milligrams of sodium in a four-ounce serving of real ground beef, the Beyond Burger and other similar products has more than five times as much sodium—390 milligrams.

Remember this when you're comparing food labels: According to the FDA, a [food](#) is consider "low sodium" if it contains no more than 140 milligrams of sodium per serving.

"Reduced sodium" means it has at least a third less sodium than the original product.

Checked your breakfast cereal lately? Only one I know that has no sodium is good ol' Shredded Wheat, with this simple ingredient label: whole grain wheat. Hopefully other products will soon improve their sodium profile.

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