Getting to Safe Sodium

Eating less red meat? Check. Avoiding trans fat? Check. Eating more vegetables and fruit? Check. Limiting sodium to a healthful level? Oops. Of all the aspects of a healthy diet, perhaps the toughest one to achieve is keeping sodium down. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that younger adults consume no more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day. Middle-aged and older people, African Americans, and anyone with high blood pressure should aim for no more than 1,500 mg per day.

But the average American consumes roughly 3,800 mg of sodium a day—men more, women less. That extra sodium may be the most dangerous thing in our diet, unnecessarily killing tens of thousands of people every year due to heart attacks and strokes.

To give you a sense of how hard it is to get down to 1,500 milligrams of sodium, consider this: two slices of bread have 200 to 400 mg, just half a cup of a typical spaghetti sauce has 300 to 600 mg, and a mere cup of canned soup has 400 to 800 mg. And you’d blow your daily sodium allowance to smithereens by eating a Smoked Turkey Breast sandwich at Panera (1,650 mg) or a Lasagna broth at Olive Garden (2,830 mg). And internists, are low in sodium. (A whole pound of table salt has 400 mg, just half a cup of a typical spaghetti sauce has 300 to 600 mg, and a mere cup of canned soup has 400 to 800 mg. And you’d blow your daily sodium allowance to smithereens by eating a Smoked Turkey Breast sandwich at Panera (1,650 mg) or a Lasagna broth at Olive Garden (2,830 mg).

Food manufacturers argue that reductions should be voluntary, but in 2010 the Institute of Medicine concluded that voluntary reductions over the previous 40 years had no effect. (We’re actually consuming more sodium now than we did then.) The FDA should limit sodium in packaged foods, the IOM declared.

But if we waited for the FDA to regulate sodium or for industry to voluntarily make major reductions, we’d be eating too much salt for decades.

And even if all companies cut their sodium by 25 percent—which may not be feasible—we’d still be consuming about 3,000 mg per day. They’d have to slash the sodium in half for us to reach 2,300 mg a day. Forget about 1,500 mg!

The good news: we don’t have to wait. We can change our own diets today, starting with reading labels and choosing lower-sodium brands.

Better yet, we can eat more fresh, unprocessed foods. After all, most natural foods, especially fruits and vegetables, are low in sodium. (A whole pound of table salt has 400 mg, just half a cup of a typical spaghetti sauce has 300 to 600 mg, and a mere cup of canned soup has 400 to 800 mg. And you’d blow your daily sodium allowance to smithereens by eating a Smoked Turkey Breast sandwich at Panera (1,650 mg) or a Lasagna broth at Olive Garden (2,830 mg).)

To cut the salt, eat more fresh, unprocessed foods.

Correction

In our March cover story, we incorrectly stated that researcher Katherina Flegal of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) “refused to participate” in a study on weight and mortality. We apologize for the error.

The next Nutrition Action will be a combined July/August issue. It should be in your mailbox by late July.

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