

Canadians are consuming far more sodium than they need to and it could be putting a strain on their health, according to Statistics Canada.

The agency issued a report on sodium intake in April 2007, which found that most people in all age groups were overdoing it when it comes to salt.

In July 2009, a report released by World Action on Salt — a British-based group established in 2005 to help gradually reduce global salt intake — found that sodium levels in a selection of processed and fast foods tended to be higher in Canada than in other countries.

Sodium levels in selected products — per 100 g serving

Kellogg's Bran Flakes

- * Canada: 861 mg
- * United States: 258 mg

Burger King onion rings

- * Canada: 681 mg
- * UK: 159 mg

KFC popcorn chicken

- * Canada: 908 mg
- * Malaysia: 560 mg

Source: World Action on Salt and Health

The report found that for every 100 grams of Kellogg's All Bran sold in Canada, there was 861 mg of sodium — the highest level of any country surveyed. In the United States, 100 grams of All Bran contained 258 mg of sodium.

Your body needs some sodium to function properly. It is the primary electrolyte that regulates fluid levels in the body. Sodium keeps your body hydrated by pumping water into the cell. In turn, potassium flushes the byproducts of cellular processes out of the cell, eventually eliminating these "wastes" from the body. Your kidneys help regulate the amount of sodium in your body. When levels are low, the kidneys conserve the mineral. When levels are high, the kidneys excrete salt in your urine.

If your kidneys can't get rid of enough sodium, it begins to accumulate in your blood. And that can cause problems because sodium attracts and holds water. More sodium increases blood volume, which in turn makes your heart work harder to move the blood through your body.

High sodium intake can push up your blood pressure and increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation suggests Canadian adults consume no more than five millilitres of salt (2,300 milligrams of sodium or a teaspoon of salt) per day. However, most adults consume far more than the recommended amount of sodium - a little more than 3,000 milligrams on average.

Your body needs only 500 mg of sodium per day to function under normal circumstances. Endurance athletes need more and should consume fluids that contain sodium if they are exercising for two hours or more.
I don't add salt to my food. Why should I be concerned?

A worker fills salt bags in the Rui Simeao saltworks in southern Portugal. Salt flower, also known as Fleur de Sel, is used frequently in haute cuisine. A worker fills salt bags in the Rui Simeao saltworks in southern Portugal. Salt flower, also known as Fleur de Sel, is used frequently in haute cuisine. (Nacho Doce/Reuters)
Well, you don't have to be — unless you have a penchant for foods like pizza, sandwiches, hamburgers or hot dogs. Or have the odd hankering for potato chips or pretzels. Or eat soup, pasta or poultry. Like to add a bit of soy sauce to your meals? Maybe eat a bit of cheese, cereal or beef?

They all contain varying levels of sodium and account for more than half of the sodium Canadians consume, according to that Statistics Canada report.

More than three-quarters of the sodium people consume comes from processed foods. The StatsCan researchers did not even look at the salt that people added to their food when they compiled their numbers.

"Yet it was the people who were already consuming the highest amounts of sodium in the foods they ate who reported most frequently adding salt," the report said.
What are the main sources of sodium?

There are three: processed and prepared foods, condiments that contain sodium, and natural sources of sodium.

Sodium is used in processed and prepared foods as a preservative and as a flavour enhancer. Some condiments contain a lot of sodium. Add 15 ml (one tablespoon) of soy sauce to your meal, and you've added 1,005 mg of sodium.

Sodium also occurs naturally in some foods such as meat, dairy products and vegetables. A slice of ham contains about 350 mg of sodium. Stick two pieces of whole wheat bread around it and you've added another 296 mg of sodium.
How do I know how much salt a product has?

Recommended adequate sodium intake

- * 1,000 mg for children aged one to three.
- * 1,200 mg for children aged four to eight.
- * 1,500 mg for people aged nine to 50.
- * 1,300 mg for adults aged 51 to 70.
- * 1,200 mg for seniors over 70 years of age.

Consuming more than 2,300 mg of sodium per day increases your risk of health problems.

Read the label. The Nutrition Facts table and the ingredient list will tell you how much sodium is in a serving of just about any food you buy:

- * In Canada, products labelled sodium-free have less than five milligrams of sodium per serving.
- * Reduced sodium products have at least 25 per cent less sodium per serving

than the original product.

* Or look at the per cent daily values (% DV) and choose products that are 10 per cent or less for sodium.

Not all sodium content is listed as "sodium." You're also getting sodium from ingredients such as monosodium glutamate (MSG), baking soda, sodium sulfite, sodium nitrate or soy sauce.

How do I limit my sodium intake?

Besides pushing away the salt shaker, you can take steps such as:

- * Eating more fresh fruits and vegetables.
- * Choosing fresh, frozen or canned food items without added salts.
- * Sticking to unsalted nuts and avoiding salty snacks like chips and pretzels.
- * Opting for fat-free or low-fat milk, low-sodium, low-fat cheeses and low-fat yogurt.
- * Selecting unsalted, fat-free broths, bouillons or soups.
- * Seasoning your foods with herbs and spices instead of salt.