

WORTH ITS SALT

You've reduced the amount of sugar in your diet. What's next? It may be time to cut down on the salt

Words **LENA SOTHERIN**

Now as abundant and mundane as coffee or tea, salt has been prized as a commodity since 6 000 BCE. The story of salt is the story of civilisation: from religious ceremonies and economic trade routes to exotic food preparations and chemical discoveries. Today, the focus has shifted to our consumption of it and its effect – for better or for worse – on the body.

MyKitchen spoke to dietitian and Association for Dietetics in SA Spokesperson Jessica Byrne about the impact of this mineral on our health.

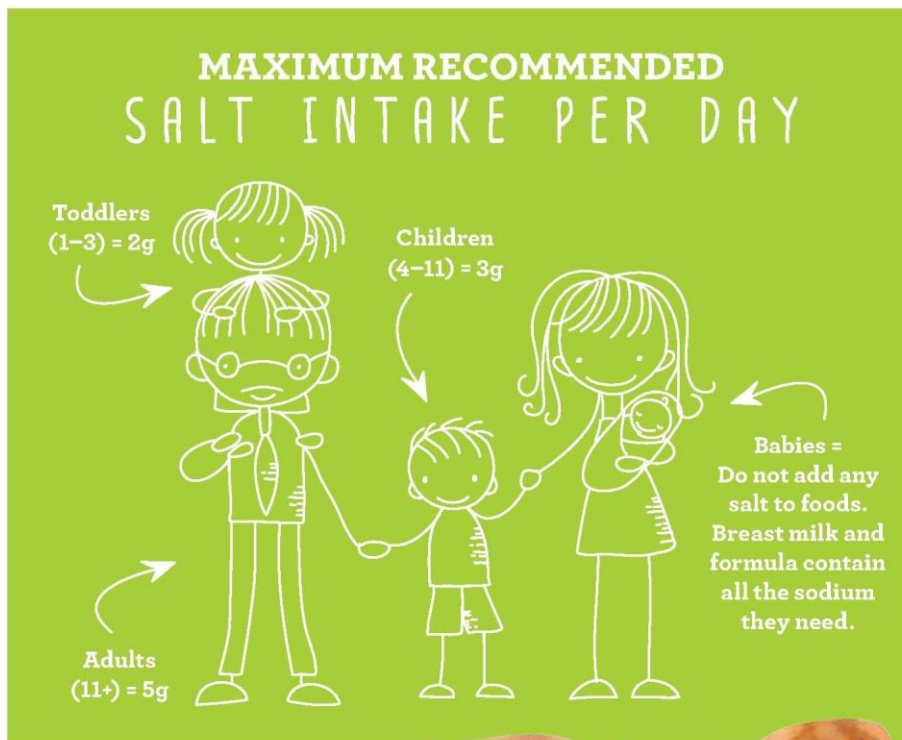
PROS AND CONS OF SALT

Sodium is an essential mineral for life, says Jessica: 'It's regulated by your kidneys, and is needed in small amounts to help control fluid balance, send nerve impulses and ensure muscle functioning.'

But, as the saying goes, too much of a good thing can be bad. 'Consuming too much salt can lead to health conditions such as kidney disease and kidney stones, osteoporosis, water retention and stomach cancer, and can worsen the symptoms of asthma.'

The most common problem, however, is high blood pressure. 'High blood pressure (or hypertension) can result from a diet that is too high in salt,' Jessica says. 'High blood pressure is a major risk factor for stroke and heart disease, but usually there are no symptoms to warn you that it's too high. That's why it's known as a "silent killer".' One in three South Africans has high blood pressure – more than 50% are undiagnosed.

Keeping your sodium levels balanced is essential for your well-being. Either extreme (too high or too low) can be harmful. 'Hyponatraemia is a low sodium



1 TEASPOON SALT
=
5g SALT
=
2g (2 000 mg) SODIUM





level in the blood,' says Jessica. 'Symptoms aren't specific and can include nausea, vomiting, headaches, seizures, muscle spasms and tiredness.'

What causes it? Drinking too much water without adequate replacement of sodium (such as during strenuous exercise) or a loss of sodium and fluid during severe vomiting and diarrhoea. 'If you experience symptoms of hyponatraemia or suspect high blood pressure, it's important to be seen by a doctor for further assessment and treatment. From the age of 20, make it a habit to have your blood pressure checked at least annually to know if you are at risk.'

CRISIS POINT

'Although our requirements for salt differ according to age, activity level, climate and the amount we sweat, the minimum amount of salt a healthy adult needs is about 1.25g per day.'

However, South Africa's current consumption is 6-11g per day - double the maximum 5g salt (or 2000 mg sodium) recommended by the World Health Organization. 'This is equivalent to 1 teaspoon of salt from all sources, including the salt added to our food during

cooking and at the table, as well as the salt already found in the processed food,' says Jessica.

HIDDEN SALT

Sodium, the mineral compound in salt that can make or break healthy systems, occurs naturally in whole foods such as milk, meat and vegetables.

This only contributes about 5% of our average salt intake, Jessica says. Most our salt intake, about 55% in fact, comes from salt added to processed foods. 'We refer to this as "hidden salt", as many of these foods don't even taste salty - think breakfast cereal, bread and spreads. Many people don't realise that they are eating too much salt.'

WEANING YOURSELF OFF

Salt is an acquired taste. 'It only takes about three weeks for our taste buds to adapt and become more sensitive, so you get the same flavour impact from less salt. Gradual changes are easier to sustain and will train your palate to need less salt.'

Flavour doesn't only come from salt, she says. 'As you cut the amount of salt in your food, substitute it with other flavour enhancers such as herbs and spices - you won't notice the loss as much.'

OPERATION: LOWER SODIUM

Cut back on processed foods

Mega-high sodium alert! Rather than slapping processed meat (ham, salami, polony) on your sandwiches, prep a little more chicken or mince while cooking supper, and make an even more delicious sarmie the next day.

Flavour your cooking

Try flavouring your food without salt. Use fresh or dried herbs such as rosemary, coriander, parsley, basil or mint; and spices such as pepper, paprika, curry powder, lemon juice, ginger and chillies.

HOW TO CUT DOWN

- Flavour your food with herbs and spices
- Cook from scratch
- Eat out less often
- Cut back on processed foods
- Train your palate by slowly reducing salt
- Read labels and menus to watch for high sodium



SODIUM OR SALT?

Table salt (or sodium chloride) consists of the minerals sodium and chloride, in a 40:60 ratio. If the ingredients only list sodium, figure out the salt content as follows: sodium grams \times 2.5 = salt grams.



SALT SENSITIVITY

'Some individuals display the genetic phenomenon of salt sensitivity, where their blood pressure rises significantly with salt intake,' says dietitian Jessica. 'This is estimated to be present in up to 80% of black African people. These individuals must limit their salt intake to less than 5g per day.'

Swap out salty snacks

Instead of salty crisps, make a bowl of popcorn. Choose fruit instead of biscuits or crackers, and switch those salted nuts for unsalted ones.

Cook from scratch

Use only fresh ingredients and control the salt content yourself. If you use salty ingredients such as stocks, spice mixes, soy sauce or soup powders, do not add in more salt.

Eat out less often

Restaurant food and takeaways are often very salty. Save eating out for special occasions and, if you do eat out, ask for the sauce and dressing to be served on the side. **mk**

FIND OUT MORE

A registered dietitian can help design a healthy eating plan that caters specifically to your lifestyle. To find a dietitian in your area, visit adsa.org.za.