

Position Statement

DIETARY SODIUM, HEART DISEASE AND STROKE

FACTS

- About five million adult Canadians have high blood pressure (hypertension), the leading risk for death in the world¹, the number one risk factor for stroke, and a major risk factor for heart disease.
- Table salt, also known as sodium chloride, consists of both sodium and chloride. One teaspoon of salt contains roughly 2,400 mg of sodium, and 3,800 mg of chloride.² It is the sodium component of salt that increases the risk for high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.³
- Humans require a small amount of sodium in order to maintain health.⁴ However, in some people, too much sodium causes blood pressure to rise. High blood pressure increases your risk for heart disease and stroke. It has been estimated that excess sodium intake is responsible for one million hypertension cases in Canada today.⁵
- Sodium is primarily added to foods to act as a preservative and to enhance taste.
- On average, adult Canadians consume about 3,500 mg (roughly 1 ½ tsp) of sodium per day.⁶ This is significantly above the level recommended as adequate (1200 to 1500 mg per day – about ½ tsp) or even the level recommended as the upper tolerable limit for health, which is 2300 mg per day (approximately 1 tsp).⁷
- Most of the sodium Canadians consume (77%) comes from processed foods sold in grocery stores and in food service outlets. Only about 11% is added during preparation or at the table, with the remainder occurring naturally in foods.⁸
- Studies indicate that the relationship between sodium intake and blood pressure varies among individuals⁹, with some people having blood pressure that is particularly sensitive to sodium intake (“sodium sensitivity”). It is particularly important for these individuals to reduce their sodium consumption.
- Dietary sodium reduction could eliminate hypertension for over a million Canadians, with a resulting savings of at least 430 million dollars annually in direct high blood pressure management costs.¹⁰
- About 1 in 7 deaths from stroke and 1 in 11 deaths from coronary heart disease could be prevented if Canadians reduced their sodium intake by 1840 mg per day (roughly ¾ tsp).¹¹
- The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada has joined with sixteen other health groups and professional associations in endorsing the Blood Pressure Canada Policy Statement on Sodium¹², which outlines the goal of reducing Canadian sodium intake to between 1200 and 2300 mg per day by January 1, 2020. Reducing the amount of sodium added to foods during processing is a critical measure for achieving this goal.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada recommends that:

Canadians

1. Eat less salt by:

- Eating less processed foods.
- Limiting eating at restaurants and fast food outlets.
- Reading the Nutrition Facts Panel on processed foods carefully. Look for foods that have less sodium by looking at the % Daily Value for sodium on the Nutrition Facts Panel. For sodium, a % Daily Value of 5% or less is considered low whereas a % Daily Value of 20% or more is considered high. Pay special attention to the following foods which can be high in sodium:

Canned soups and dry soup mixes
Canned meats and fish
Ham, bacon and sausage
Salted nuts
Instant cooked cereals
Salted butter and margarine
Bread and bread products
Tomato juice, vegetable juices and blends
Processed meats, such as deli items and hot dogs
Prepared mixes (pancake, muffin, cornbread, etc.)
Prepackaged frozen dinners
Preseasoned mixes (tacos, chili, rice, sauces, gravies, etc.)
Snack foods (pretzels, potato chips, olives, cheeses, pickles)
Salad dressings and condiments
Fast food

- Adding little or no salt to foods when cooking.
 - Removing the salt shaker from the table and avoiding adding salt to your food.
 - Looking for the Health Check™ symbol on processed foods and in food service outlets that participate in the Health Check™ program.
2. Reduce your risk of high blood pressure in other ways such as being physically active for 30 to 60 minutes on most days of the week, eating a healthy diet, achieving and maintaining a healthy weight, limiting alcohol consumption, setting aside some time every day to relax, and living smoke-free.
3. Have your blood pressure measured at least once a year by a healthcare professional, know and understand what your blood pressure is and learn to take your own blood pressure correctly.
4. Visit the Heart and Stroke Foundation's online Blood Pressure Action Program at heartandstroke.ca/bp.
5. Consult your doctor or healthcare professional to better understand how salt affects your health and find out what you can do to reduce your risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.

Federal Government

Support Canadians to achieve the goal of reducing sodium intake to between 1200 and 2300 mg per day by January 1, 2020. This can be accomplished by, among other things:

- Adequately supporting Health Canada's multi-stakeholder Working Group on Dietary Sodium Reduction and acting on its recommendations in a timely manner to meet the 2020 sodium intake goal.
- Establishing effective and timely monitoring systems to track sodium levels in the diets of Canadians and reporting on progress toward the achievement of the 2020 goal.
- Standardizing the "serving amount" on the Nutrition Facts Panel on similar products, to help Canadians compare sodium levels between products and make healthier food choices.
- Educating Canadians about the health risks of high sodium intake and how to reduce their sodium consumption within the context of a healthy diet.

Health Professional Organizations

Educate memberships about:

- The health risks of excess dietary sodium.
- How to reduce sodium intake within the context of a healthy diet.
- How to counsel their patients/clients to reduce sodium intake.

Food Industry

1. Reduce sodium additives to foods during processing and preparation.
2. As with trans fat reduction, take a leadership role and continue to reduce sodium levels in all foods sold to consumers in Canada.
3. Support efforts to educate Canadians about the health benefits of consuming foods which are low in sodium.
4. Make readily available the nutrition facts information, including sodium content for all foods sold in food service outlets.

Researchers

1. Identify the health and economic impacts of sodium reduction in the Canadian food supply.
2. Conduct clinical trials designed to assess the impact of sodium reduction on heart disease and stroke.
3. Design studies to identify the genetic and dietary factors that affect salt sensitivity.
4. Develop practical tools to measure sodium intake and to assess total body levels of sodium.
5. Identify the influence of sodium intake during infancy and childhood on blood pressure later in life.



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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Hypertension impact on heart and stroke

One quarter of the adult Canadian population has hypertension, or high blood pressure, and more than 90% of Canadians will develop hypertension if they live the average lifespan.³ Many Canadians with high blood pressure do not realize that they have it.

Over time high blood pressure can damage blood vessel walls causing scarring that promotes the build-up of fatty plaque, which can narrow and eventually block arteries. It also strains the heart and eventually weakens it. Very high blood pressure can cause blood vessels in the brain to burst, resulting in a stroke.¹³

Hypertension is the number one preventable risk factor for stroke, and significantly increases the risk for all cardiovascular disease outcomes including coronary artery disease and congestive heart failure.¹⁴

Reducing sodium intake to combat hypertension

According to Canada's Food Guide, eating a healthy and balanced diet includes eating 4 to 10 servings of vegetables and fruit per day, a variety of whole grains, selecting lower fat dairy products, meats, and alternatives, as well as limiting choices which are high in fat, sugar and sodium.

In addition to eating a healthy, balanced diet, several scientific and public health organizations have specifically recommended reducing dietary sodium in the population through changes to food processing as a means of reducing the prevalence of hypertension. The American Heart Association and the American Public Health Association have called for 50% reductions in sodium additives to food.¹⁵ The American Medical Association has asked the American government to remove sodium additives from the "generally recognized as safe" category¹⁶, and the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition in the UK has recommended substantial reductions in dietary sodium.¹⁷ The World Health Organization has called on governments to introduce regulations on sodium additives to food.¹⁸

The U.S. Institute of Medicine of the National Academies recommends a range of 1200 - 1500 mg of sodium per day as the adequate intake for people aged 9 to 50 years, with a Tolerable Upper Intake Level of 2300 mg per day for setting public health policy.¹⁹

Canadian sodium consumption levels

The 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey found that the average sodium intake for Canadians is 3,092 mg (about 1 ¼ tsp), not including salt added during preparation and at the table.²⁰ The average is estimated at 3500 mg (roughly 1 ½ tsp) when salt added during cooking and at the table is included.²¹ The survey found that intake levels were far beyond the recommended upper limit for all ages. Among people aged 19 to 70, over 85% of men and 60% of women had sodium intakes exceeding the recommended upper limit.

Salt added to foods during processing is estimated to account for about 77% of the sodium consumed by Canadians.²² Therefore, changes to food processing are needed to achieve a reduction in sodium and a resulting reduction in hypertension for the Canadian population.

This will require significant government involvement to lead to gradual reductions in dietary sodium, as well as action on the part of the food sector.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada endorses Blood Pressure Canada's Policy on Sodium, which can be obtained at <http://hypertension.ca/bpc/first-steps-taken-towards-a-national-sodium-reduction-strategy/>.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada's Health Check™ program is committed to taking a leadership role in reducing the sodium content in Canada's food supply by reducing the sodium criteria for the program and by working with the food industry to achieve the 2020 sodium intake goal.



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The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada recognizes that the life-long heart health of Canadians is affected by both individual and social factors. Individual factors include genetic make-up, personal health choices and actions, and social support. Social factors include the social, economic and environmental conditions in which Canadians live, work, learn and play. The Foundation encourages Canadians to make heart-healthy choices and encourages governments and the private sector to develop policies and programs that support healthy communities and reduce inequalities that negatively affect health and well-being.

The information contained in this position statement is current as of: APRIL 2009

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