

Sodium Send-off

Why convenience foods aren't worth their salt

by MADELEINE GREY

My 12-year-old son loves a good hot dog, especially if it's slathered with Cheez Whiz and ketchup. Heck, I know it's not exactly health food, but when I glanced at the sodium levels on the food packaging, I was bowled over.

When kids kick back mountains of salt, their bodies heave a silent shudder. It's not an instant problem, more a gradual morph that turns into a salt-craving habit that could lead to adult health problems. Cut out the salt, adults are warned, or risk high blood pressure. But is the same true for kids?

According to Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada spokesperson Norm Campbell of Calgary, no surveys have been done on children and high blood pressure in Canada. But if we look across the border, the picture isn't pretty.

"In the United States, there's increasing blood pressures among children, largely driven by obesity, sedentary behaviour and poor dietary habits," says Campbell. "We have the same trends in Canada. It's extrapolation, but the precursors are there. We're very likely to have the same problem."

So we need some limits. It's recommended that children and adults consume no more than 2400 mg of sodium a day — that's about 1 tsp of salt. But before you lock up the salt shaker, consider this: Most of the sodium kids eat today lurks in their food and slips below parents' radar.

SALTY SLEUTHING

Common sense told me that deli meats were high in sodium, but it still took my breath away to learn



The Dish on Portions

calories	150
protein	4.5 g
fat	8.3 g
carbohydrates	16.3 g
iron	14%*
niacin	13%*
vitamin B ₁	16%*

*of recommended daily amount

Little Bites Snack Mix

You control the sodium with this mix. Be sure to use garlic and onion powder, not garlic or onion salt, which contain you-know-what. Soy nuts make this snack schoolyard- and daycare-friendly where no-nut policies are in place.

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|------------------------|--|
| 3 tbsp (45 mL) | olive oil |
| 1 tbsp (15 mL) | Worcestershire sauce |
| ½ tsp (2 mL) | garlic powder |
| ½ tsp (2 mL) | onion powder |
| ½ tsp (2 mL) | paprika |
| ½ tsp (2 mL) | salt |
| ¼ tsp (1 mL) | wheat square cereal (a.k.a. Shreddies) |
| 2 cups (500 mL) | toasted oat cereal (a.k.a. Cheerios) |
| 2 cups (500 mL) | low-sodium pretzels (such as Snyder's of Hanover) |
| 2 cups (500 mL) | Goldfish (Pepperidge Farm) |
| 1 cup (250 mL) | unsalted peanuts or unsalted soy nuts |
| 1 cup (250 mL) | |

Preheat the oven to 250 °F (120 °C).

In a small bowl, whisk together olive oil, Worcestershire sauce, garlic and onion powder, paprika and salt.

In a large roasting pan, combine wheat square cereal, toasted oat cereal, pretzels, Goldfish and peanuts or soy nuts. Drizzle with oil mixture and mix well. Bake for 1 hour, turning contents every 15 minutes to prevent heavy browning.

Makes 16 servings.

Our recipe tester, Adell Shneer, tests Nutrition using both imperial and metric measurements. However, proportions in the metric version may differ slightly from the original, causing small variations in the result.

that a single hot dog supplies about 25 percent of a day's allowance. And that's not all. A ¼ cup serving of Heinz Zoodles delivers 620 mg sodium; a bowl of Equality chicken-flavour oriental noodles and soup mix contains 1370 mg. Cakes, cookies, even condiments have sodium — 2 tbsp of ketchup have more sodium than a small 3 oz/100 g serving of french fries!

That's nothing compared with fast food:

- McDonald's cheeseburger, small fries (with ketchup, of course), chocolate milk and a vanilla cone = 1260 mg sodium (about ½ tsp salt)
- Tomato Parmesan soup at Tim Hortons = 1770 mg sodium (¾ tsp salt)
- Big Bacon Classic meal at Wendy's = 1330 mg sodium (just over ½ tsp salt)

With a little label snooping, it's easy to see that a single meal can exceed a whole day's worth of sodium. According to the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada's website, most Canadian adults consume much more: up to 3 tsp a day. While there are no statistics on childhood sodium consumption, Toronto dietitian Carol Dombrow says we should be concerned. Kids are getting too much.

"And the more salt we feed them," says Dombrow, "the more kids develop a taste for it, wanting more

as they get older. Getting used to salty foods is a hard habit to break."

KICKING THE HABIT

Switching to low-salt products like Windsor Half Salt seems like the obvious solution. "Not necessary," says Dombrow. Salt substitutes containing potassium chloride (like Windsor Half) are popular since they taste just like salt. But they don't train young taste buds to scale back. On the other hand, Mrs. Dash, made of 14 different herbs and spices, has no salt or potassium chloride. If you can get your kids hooked on those flavours versus salt, more power to you!

Making a conscious effort to use less salt when you're cooking also helps (though just 5 percent of sodium is added during cooking). But the lion's share of sodium hides neatly inside processed and restaurant food. The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) estimates 77 percent — or just over three-quarters.

Look for sodium-reduced products as much as possible, especially broths and seasonings like soy sauce, barbecue and teriyaki sauce. Drain and rinse canned vegetables and beans to remove some of the salt. A spritz of lemon or lime juice or a handful of freshly chopped herbs adds tons of taste and no sodium.

Look for Health Check



The Heart and Stroke Foundation's Health Check logo ensures you are buying food with heart-healthy lower sodium levels.

Looking for the logo is a lot easier than squinting at the small print on nutrition labels. Logo-bearing highlights include low-sodium V8, Grissol's croutons, melba toast and canapés, Heinz beans and Orville Redenbacher's Smart Pop.

PICK UP POTASSIUM

Cooking more foods from scratch and relying less on processed foods offer a one-way ticket to less sodium in the diet, especially if you pack more potassium-rich fresh produce into your meals.

"Here's another great reason to add more fresh fruits and vegetables to your diet," says Vince Ziccarelli, of Dial-a-Dietitian in Vancouver. "Fresh produce is rich in potassium, which is known to lower blood pressure and offset the negative effects of sodium."

There's a yin-yang relationship between these two synergistic minerals, both known as electrolytes and both important players in the body's delicate regulation of blood pressure and water balance. Healthy childhood bodies need lots of potassium, found in dried fruits, wheat germ, bran, nuts, seeds, potatoes (especially with skin) and as most people know — the banana.

So give your salt hounds a banana. Let them go wild and squeeze some lemon juice on their veggies. Invite them to become "sodium detectives" and ferret out big salt numbers on food labels with you. Let salt do a disappearing act in your home. That's the kind of magic that makes real nutritional sense. ♥

FAQ

■ There's sugar in your salt! Salt manufacturers, such as Windsor, add minuscule quantities of dextrose to stabilize iodine, which has been added to table salt since the 1920s. The Food and Drugs Act made iodine a mandatory addition to table salt (but not other salts like sea or kosher salt) to ensure proper thyroid functioning and the prevention of goitre.

■ Salt isn't your only iodine source. Other rich sources include seafood, seaweed and dairy products, and plants grown in iodine-rich soil.

■ Table salt also has calcium silicate, an anti-caking agent that helps absorb moisture in humid climates. Still clumping? Try a few grains of raw rice. If that doesn't work, look for salt shakers with airtight lids or store your shaker in a plastic bag.

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