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Mayo Clinic Office Visit

REDUCING DAILY SODIUM

An Interview With Gary Schwartz, M.D.

In 2005, federal dietary guidelines recommended that American adults consume no more than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium a day — or the equivalent of 1 teaspoon of table salt. The same guidelines advised adults who had high blood pressure (hypertension), or who were at increased risk of hypertension, to lower daily sodium intakes to 1,500 mg. Now, a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests that the lower daily intake applies to most Americans. In fact, CDC researchers found that 70 percent of the adult population should be consuming much less sodium because they have hypertension or are at high risk of the disease because of their age or ethnic background. Unfortunately, most Americans have sodium intakes that exceed the recommended amount for any individual.

Here, Gary Schwartz, M.D., a hypertension specialist at Mayo Clinic, discusses why sodium intake is a major health concern and what individuals can do to limit sodium in their diet.

WHS: *How much sodium should most people be getting in their diet?*

Dr. Schwartz: No one really knows what the minimum intake of sodium should be, or what's the lowest amount we actually need. The CDC report, which recommends that people with hypertension or who are at risk of heart disease reduce their daily intake to 1,500 mg, is a shift down from the current recommendation by guideline groups. However, most of the data we have regarding the relationship between sodium intake and health would suggest that the less sodium we consume, the better off we are. That's especially true of people with hypertension as well as people who are at higher risk of hypertension, such as African-Americans and people with a family history of the disease.

Many people are probably aware that too much sodium can cause or aggravate

hypertension, a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke. But they may be less aware that a high sodium intake can increase the risk of stroke even without an increase in blood pressure. Too much sodium can also increase the risk of osteoporosis and kidney stones. Studies also have shown a relationship between a high-salt diet and stomach cancer. ■

WHS: *Why are most Americans consuming too much sodium?*

Dr. Schwartz: The average American is eating at least two or three times the recommended amount of daily sodium. But I don't think many know it. Only about 20 percent comes from the salt we add during cooking or shake on food at the table. Eighty percent of our daily sodium intake is already in the food we're eating. Processed foods, canned foods and the foods we eat in restaurants are all very high in sodium. But you may not know this unless you read the labels on food or look up information on restaurant items. ■

WHS: *What's the best way to reduce or limit sodium intake?*

Dr. Schwartz: Eat more fresh foods and less canned and processed foods. Fruits and vegetables are very low in sodium. Also, eat less in restaurants, especially fast-food restaurants, and use unsalted spices (garlic powder over garlic salt, for example) in the food you eat at home. With any processed or canned food, check the sodium content on the label. It's best to use only those with low-sodium content. I also recommend washing off some canned items, like vegetables, in water. This can help remove some of the sodium. People can get addicted to the salty taste of foods. But by lowering the amount of sodium you eat over time, you can lessen your taste for it. ■

Reading Labels

When reading food labels, here's how to decipher common claims about sodium content:

- **Sodium free or no sodium = Less than 5 milligrams (mg) of sodium**
- **Very low sodium = 35 mg or less of sodium**
- **Low sodium = 140 mg or less of sodium**
- **Reduced or less sodium = At least 25 percent less sodium than regular product**