Halt The Salt

Credit - Joy Bauer, M.S., R.D., C.D.N.

When it comes to salt, the National Institute of Health and the American Heart Association recommend no more than 2,300 milligrams daily (that's one teaspoon of salt). However, most Americans consume between 4,000 to 6,000 milligrams on a daily basis! Read my next two blog entries to find out why you should start cutting back... and which foods you should limit.

What Is Salt?

Salt is comprised of two minerals, sodium and chloride, but sodium is the specific mineral of concern (and sodium is what you'll find on your food labels). Some sodium is essential. In fact, sodium helps to maintain proper fluid balance in and out of cells, regulate blood pressure, and transmit nerve impulses. Sodium occurs naturally in some foods, but *most* of the sodium we consume is from processed and packaged products. That's because, sodium not only affects flavor, but can change texture, control the speed of fermentation, stabilize volume, and promote color enhancement.

Health Consequences From Too Much Salt

- *There is a strong link between sodium and **high blood pressure** in people who are salt sensitive*. Salt attracts water -- salt pulls water into the blood vessels and this extra volume creates added pressure.

- *High salt intake may be associated with increased risk of **gastroesophageal reflux (GERD)***. A recent study of lifestyle related risk factors in the development of gastroesophageal reflux suggested a potential relationship between salt intake and reflux. More research is needed.

- *Increased dietary sodium is known to trigger **urinary calcium loss***. With high levels of sodium intake, the body compensates by increasing urinary excretion. Because sodium and calcium excretion occur together, higher levels of urinary sodium result in increased calcium excretion with possible adverse effects on bone health.

Because lowering the amount of salt you consume is important -- it's beneficial for everyone to read labels and learn the sodium guidelines set by the FDA. Here's what the terminology means:

- **Sodium-free** -- less than 5 milligrams of sodium per serving
- **Very low-sodium** -- 35 milligrams or less per serving
- **Low-sodium** -- 140 milligrams or less per serving

- **Reduced sodium** -- usual sodium level is reduced by 25% of the original item.
- **Unsalted, no salt added, or without added salt** -- made without the added salt that's normally used, but still contains the sodium that's a natural part of the food itself
- **Healthy** -- FDA and USDA state that a food that has the claim "healthy" must not exceed 360 mg sodium per reference amount. However, "meal type" products are typically larger, so they must not exceed 480 mg sodium per portion.

Also, be aware of the following red flags:

- Ingredients with sodium:
    - Baking Soda
    - Baking Powder
    - Brine
    - Broth
    - MSG
    - NaCl
    - Salt
    - Soy Sauce

- High sodium preparation methods:
    - Cured
    - Corned
    - Pickled
    - Smoked

- Common foods and their average sodium amounts:
    - Table Salt (1/4 teaspoon) 580mg
    - Salt Substitute (1/4 teapsoon) 0mg
    - Ketchup (2Tbsp) 380mg
    - Bacon (3 slices) 435mg
    - Lox (2 oz) 840mg
    - Luncheon Meat (4 oz) 1200mg
    - Canned Soup (2 cups) 1880mg
    - Pickle (1) 833mg
    - Salad dressing, commercial brands (4 Tbsp) 860mg
    - Frozen Entrée (average serving) 880mg
    - Soy sauce (1 Tbsp) 1014mg
    - Low-sodium soy sauce (1 Tbsp) 599mg
    - Chicken Broth (1 cup) 980mg
    - Chicken Broth (1 cup) 0 - 140mg

Keep in mind that a lot of your favorite high sodium foods, like canned soup and luncheon meat, come in tasty, low-salt varieties. For example, the following offer tasty low-sodium meal options: *Healthy Choice* (canned and frozen varieties), *Progresso* (canned), *Campbell's* (canned), and *Amy's* (canned and frozen).