[IMAGE]

Eat Less Salt!

By Editorial Staff

Seems like simple advice; so why do so many people suffer the health consequences of excessive sodium consumption? These days, a major culprit isn't what we sprinkle on our foods – it's the food itself.

The fast- and processed-food industries offer a staggering variety of sodium-laden foods, many of which make a huge dent in your recommended daily allowance for sodium in a single serving. Example: Look closely at canned soup labels; many soups contain 2,000 mg or more of sodium per can – more than 80 percent of your RDA (currently 2,400 mg for adults under age 51 and 1,500 for those over age 51 or suffering from high blood pressure, diabetes or kidney disease.)

Sodium Gone Wild

Sodium plays an important role in the body in the proper amounts – it helps maintain fluid balance, transmit nerve impulses, and influence muscle contraction and relaxation – but too much can be a big problem. Sodium attracts and retains water; too much sodium will accumulate in the blood, increasing blood volume. The heart has to work harder to pump that blood, increasing arterial pressure. Chronic fluid retention and increased blood pressure can lead to heart disease, stroke and congestive heart failure.

Within reason, your kidneys can handle too little or too much sodium; if the body isn't getting enough (which is rare), the kidneys hold on to sodium; if it's getting too much, the kidneys excrete the excess through the urine. The problem is that the average American consumes so much sodium on a daily basis (3,400 mg on average, or 1,000 mg more than the RDA) that the kidneys can't always eliminate enough.

The Potassium Connection

Salt - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Potassium and sodium work together in the body to maintain cellular fluid balance. Cells actually have a sodium-potassium "pump" that helps facilitate this balance; by pumping sodium ions out of the cell in exchange for potassium ions, sodium is removed from the cell. As mentioned, sodium attracts water; if sodium stayed within the cell, it would effectively explode from the inward diffusion of water.

Because sodium and potassium have this vital balancing function on a cellular level, getting the right amounts of both in your diet is equally vital. That means limiting your sodium intake while ensuring you don't ignore potassium. The RDA for potassium is currently 4,700 mg; ideal food sources include bananas, citrus juices, avocados, cantaloupes, tomatoes, potatoes and lima beans. (A medium banana provides in the neighborhood of 450 mg of potassium.)

Many foods contain potassium (particularly plant-based foods), but in today's culture, you can see why people are struggling to meet their RDA for potassium and far exceeding it when it comes to sodium. The solution: Be a smart shopper. Evaluate the sodium content in your favorite foods and make wise decisions that ensure you come in at or under your daily requirement for sodium, not way above it. Talk to your doctor to learn more.