

... FEBRUARY 2011 ...

QUICK TAKES



Eating Right for Your Heart

Eating a healthy diet is an important factor in preventing hypertension and lowering your risk of cardiovascular disease.

- Cutting back on sodium in your diet can help lower blood pressure.
- Get tough -- and bring your reading glasses -- when grocery shopping. Choose low-sodium options at every opportunity when buying processed foods.
- Learn to boost the flavor in foods with herbs and spices.



Shake Out Salt to Prevent Hypertension

Study after study has shown that reducing sodium intake helps lower blood pressure. And healthy blood pressure levels translate into lower rates of heart disease and stroke. Health officials in Finland recognized this correlation more than 30 years ago and called for an aggressive reduction of the salt added to foods. Average sodium intake dropped by 40 percent, average blood pressure levels declined, and deaths from stroke dropped by a whopping 80 percent.



In the U.S. last year, the Institute of Medicine labeled high blood pressure a "neglected disease" and called for preventive health measures that include lowering the salt in processed foods. About the same time, a number of big American food manufacturers announced that they intend to reduce sodium levels in many of their key brands by as much as 20 percent over the next two to five years.

If you're looking to cut back on sodium now, it makes sense to hide the saltshaker. More importantly you should know how much salt is already in the foods you prepare. Here's a practical guide on what to look for in the supermarket when trying to watch your sodium:

Ketchup, Pasta Sauces, Salsas

Food companies love to pair tomatoes and salt. Consider ketchup at 200 mg sodium per tablespoon. Or pasta sauce at 700 mg per 1/2 cup. Or salsa at 200 mg per 2-tablespoon serving. Lower sodium and no-salt-added tomato products are on the shelves, but you'll have to look hard for them.

Canned Soups

They say "soup is good food" and many canned soups do offer a high level of nutrients. Unfortunately, many brands are very high in sodium. Pay attention to the nutrition label. If you find low-sodium soups a little bland, add freshly ground pepper or a sprinkling of scallion greens to perk up the flavors.

Salad Dressings

The square footage devoted to salad dressings in the supermarket aisle can be overwhelming. Many brands tout herbs, cheese, fruit flavors and exotic vinegars -- but the underlying flavor in most is simply salt. Again, study the nutrition label. Even if the brand is labeled "light," it does not necessarily mean light in sodium, just lower in fat and calories. The best way to control sodium and deliver lots of flavor is to make your own dressing using a fruity olive oil and balsamic or red wine vinegar.

Canned Beans

With all canned beans, empty the can into a strainer and rinse thoroughly under running water to remove up to 40 percent of the excess sodium and that "canned" flavor. Eden Foods and Goya are two national brands that are now available in low-sodium versions.

Whoa! Watch that soy sauce!

Just one tablespoon of regular soy sauce delivers 920 milligrams of sodium -- that's 40 percent of the recommended amount for a whole day. Low-sodium soy sauce is a better choice, but it still has 500 milligram per tablespoon, so go easy.

Finding Fresh Flavors Without Salt

When trying to cut back on salt it helps to know which herbs and spices you can lean on to boost flavor in your favorite dishes. Here's a quick guide:

Basil Fresh basil is delicious with seafood, lamb, salads and just about anything tomato-based. Stack leaves and slice in very thin strips (Dried basil adds very little flavor.)

Bay Leaves Add a bay leaf to long-simmering soups, stews and bean dishes.

Cider Vinegar Stir in a teaspoon or two to meat sauces, marinades and salad dressings to wake up flavors.

Cinnamon isn't just for apple pies. Sprinkle it on chicken, pilafs or even chili.

Garlic (not garlic salt) powers up potatoes, tomatoes, meats, seafood and bean soups.

Ginger Grated fresh ginger isn't just for Chinese cooking. Pork, chicken, broccoli, cabbage and tropical

fruits salads are all a little livelier with fresh ginger.

Lemon Grated lemon zest is great for marinades. A squeeze of fresh lemon juice is perfect in salad dressings and on fish, chicken and vegetables.

Paprika brings depth and color to sauces and grilled meat or vegetables. Look for Spanish smoked paprika (aka pimentón).

Parsley keeps for a week or longer in the fridge, so there's no excuse not to have it on hand. Chop it fresh for stews, pasta dishes, salad dressing, marinades and more.

Red Pepper Dried and crushed or ground chile peppers add heat and underlying flavor to your favorite Latin American recipes. Start with a tiny amount and taste as you go.

Scallions Slice thinly to garnish soups, stews, stir-fries and dips.

Thyme Dried or fresh, thyme complements poultry, bean dishes, soups, onions, tomatoes and salads.

Pasta e Fagiolo (Pasta and Bean Soup) Makes: 4 servings

The fiber-rich combo of pasta, beans and veggies makes for heart-healthy, rib-sticking goodness. Look for no-salt-added or low-sodium brands when buying the tomatoes, beans and broth.

Ingredients

1 teaspoon olive oil
1 medium onion, chopped
1 can (14 oz) no-salt-added diced tomatoes
1 can (15 oz) low-sodium Great Northern or cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
2 cups low-sodium chicken or vegetable broth
½ teaspoon mixed dried Italian herbs
1 bay leaf
Freshly ground black pepper (to taste)
1 cup multi-grain elbows or other small pasta
2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley or basil
1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar
½ cup freshly grated Parmesan or pecorino

Preparation

1. Heat olive oil in a large saucepan or Dutch oven set over medium heat. Add onions and cook, stirring, until they begin to soften, about 5 minutes.
2. Stir in tomatoes and their juices, beans, broth, dried herbs and bay leaf. Add a generous grinding of black pepper. Bring to a boil and cook for 5 minutes. Stir in pasta and cook until tender but firm, about 12 minutes. Add more broth if needed.
3. Stir in fresh herbs and balsamic vinegar. Ladle the thick soup into bowls and sprinkle with grated cheese.



Nutritional info / serving

306 Calories
4g Fat
1g Saturated fat
0g Trans Fat
17g Protein
47g Carbohydrate
9g Fiber
393mg Sodium
150mg Calcium

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