Cutting Back on Salt

Reaching for the salt shaker? Think again. Although it adds flavor to our foods, it can be harmful to your health. Although there’s been debate over the years, we now have strong evidence that reducing your salt intake lowers blood pressure. You may also have been advised to reduce your salt intake if you have kidney disease or certain types of heart disease.

How do you go about reducing your salt intake? Even if you don’t add salt to your food, you can still get too much sodium (a part of salt) from the foods you eat. Most of the sodium that Americans get comes from processed foods, not from the salt shaker. With many of us relying more on convenience foods and restaurant foods, it becomes much more difficult to reduce our sodium intake.

Experts recommend that Americans limit sodium to less than 2400 milligrams each day or less as your doctor advises. Most Americans get more than twice that amount - about 5,000 milligrams of sodium each day.

So what can you do? You’ll be happy to learn that salt is an acquired taste. If you gradually cut back on sodium for about six weeks, you will begin to prefer less salty foods. Eating more foods at home where you can control the amount of sodium is a start. Choose more fresh foods instead of processed foods. Generally, the outer perimeter of the grocery store contains the fresh foods while the inner aisles contain the majority of the processed foods. Choose fresh, uncured meats, fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables without sauces, plain pasta and rice.

When buying canned foods, choose low sodium canned vegetables, V-8 juice, and reduced sodium soups. Use less salt in cooking and add commercial herb/spice mixtures. Buy low-sodium bouillon instead of regular. Check out the nutrition labels
on packaged foods. Look for sodium-free, very low-sodium, or low sodium. Look for foods with less than 400 milligrams of sodium for a single serving of a side dish. Look for less than 800 milligrams of sodium for frozen entrees or packaged dinners. In general, brands that are lower in sodium and fat are those that are specifically targeted to the health-conscious consumer such as Healthy Choice, Lean Cuisine, and Weight Watcher’s Smart Ones.

Eat fast foods infrequently. Most fast foods are very high in sodium. For example, a Chick-fil-A chargrilled chicken sandwich contains 1,000 mg of sodium; a Hardee’s plain biscuit has 1,000 mg sodium; a Pizza Hut Personal Pan pizza has over 1400 mg sodium; a regular ham and cheese sandwich at Schlotzsky’s Deli contains a whopping 3459 mg; Blimpie’s 6-inch subs are all over 1,000 mg each. Compare these values with a sandwich you can make at home. A sandwich with 3 ounces of sliced roast turkey and 1 ounce of Swiss cheese on whole wheat bread with mayonnaise and mustard is about 550 milligrams of sodium.

When eating in restaurants, steer away from cured and smoked foods and sauces. Ask if your food can be prepared without added salt, soy sauce, or MSG. It will take some time to acquire a taste for less salt. But, you will eventually have an enhanced sense of taste for salt and be better able to appreciate the taste of the food itself.

Mixed Fruit Salad

1 medium apple, cored and chopped
1 medium banana, sliced
1/2 cup mandarin oranges packed in light syrup, drained
2 Tbs. pecan halves, unsalted
2 Tbs. Lite strawberry-flavored yogurt
2 Tbs. Lite Cool Whip
Mix together all ingredients. Makes 4 servings.
Exchanges: 1 fruit, 1/2 fat
Nutrition Information:
- Calories: 100
- Carbohydrate: 18 grams
- Protein: 1 gram
- Fat: 3 grams
- Cholesterol: 0 mg
- Sodium: 8 mg
- Fiber: 2 grams

Your Relationships

Memory and Aging

Memory is both marvelous and worrisome. Our brains can take in an amazing array of information, store it, and then find it again upon demand. But, finding everything exactly when it is wanted may not always happen. Older adults, in particular, can become worried. In people over age 60, over 80% complain about their memory function. But only 15% ever discuss these concerns with a doctor. Many older adults believe it is inevitable to experience memory problems with age. Others say their doctors just tell them, “What do you expect?”
The research that has been done to understand why older people do have some increase in “memory lapses” suggests that while minor difficulties do occur with aging, major memory changes are frequently related to such underlying causes as medications, disease, depression, or malnutrition. Many of these conditions are treatable and reversible but some are permanent disorders.

About 85% of seniors experience some memory impairment -- the “tip-of-the-tongue” memory loss is most common. This is the “speed of recall” issue and rarely is more than an inconvenience. Metamemory is a person’s knowledge, perception and beliefs about his or her memory. Research in this area has focused on trying to understand the differences in memory function among older adults. Three areas of importance were identified: memory monitoring - how one uses memory and current memory status; memory self-efficacy - or one’s sense of mastery and the beliefs and expectations about memory; and memory related affect including emotional states like anxiety, fatigue or depression. What has been determined is that a person’s confidence does affect performance. As a person ages, he or she is likely to have negative beliefs about memory performance. People joke when they forget something that they have “old
timer’s disease.”

Finally, memory performance is influenced by a person’s emotional state. Anxiety or other strong emotions may keep a person from paying attention or taking in information. Because many seniors do not expect to have good memories, they have a lower confidence level, may be anxious about remembering, and generally may not seek to understand how or when their memory is working well. The metamemory research confirms that memory performance may be “in your head!”

The brain is not fixed at birth; it is “plastic” or malleable as the need arises. Consider the effect of a severe stroke, which caused brain damage serious enough that a person couldn’t speak or walk. Why can over 30% of those affected learn to walk and talk again? The brain is able to use different areas to relearn skills. Many conditions (medical and others) can affect memory. Most memory problems have to do with speed of recall or inadequate learning in the first
place. If a person didn’t hear or learn a name last week why would remembering the name be an expectation? Individual habits and beliefs may be at the root of many memory problems. If keys are put down in a different place each day, it will be hard to remember where they are.

The brain is as responsive as any muscle to challenge: Use it or lose it. Learning continues throughout life. Activities that engage the mind can improve memory function! Seniors can engage in activities that help them pinpoint some sources that contribute to their own memory problems -- like habits, thinking patterns, and beliefs. By identifying areas for change, an older adult can begin improving memory function. There are also many memory aids that can be used to maintain better memory outcomes.

Adapted from J. Warren, Texas Cooperative Extension, 2002.

**Your Resources**

**Misconceptions of Estate Planning**

If you think estate planning does not need to be a part of your financial picture, then you should reconsider your thinking. Everyone can benefit from estate planning. There are some common misconceptions about estate planning that need to be cleared up before proceeding.

• **“Estate Planning is needed by elderly and wealthy people only.”**

• First off, couples with children might have more important reasons to engage in estate planning than the elderly. Parents need to name a personal and financial guardian for their children in case the parents pass away. Second, there are reminders in the news every day that death does not respect age. An estate plan will ensure that your assets are properly distributed according to your wishes in the case of your death.

• The wealthy misconception is also twofold. Many people are surprised at the size of their estate. You might need to be concerned with eliminating and preserving estate taxes and not realize it yet. Even if your estate is modest, you should be interested in wealth preservation at death to pass it on to the heirs of your choice.

• **“A Simple Will lasts a lifetime.”**

Even though a will is the foundation of an estate plan, you could possibly need other tools to effectively handle your estate. Life insurance, gifts, and trusts are other components that an attorney might deem necessary to accomplish your wishes.

Factors that determine what tools are needed to handle your estate include the size of your estate, the makeup of your family, personal preferences, and tax laws. All of these factors change over time, so a will that is only a few years old could be inconsistent with your currently desired wishes for your estate.

• **“The State has laws to protect my estate.”**

Every state has testate laws designed
to settle estates of those who fail to leave behind a valid will at their death. However, the laws will not generally settle an estate in a manner that is identical with the wishes of the deceased. Furthermore, this route is commonly more costly and prone to problems than situations planned during life.

• “Joint Ownership with my spouse is a practical substitute for an estate plan.”

  Joint ownership of certain types of property can offer spouses significant advantages. On the negative side, some joint ownership arrangements can have some serious tax consequences. The advice of an attorney is needed to determine what is right for you.

• “Estate Planning is too expensive.”

  Although, you should use an estate-planning attorney to write your will, writing a will can be as simple as a using a form from a business supply store or from the internet. Using an attorney should assure you that your will encompasses all of your wishes. The cost will be depend on the complexity of your estate and should not be a roadblock. Cost varies between a few hundred dollars to several thousand for complex estates. Remember, money spent now could save your family a lot of money and problems when you die.

Adapted from: Estate Planning Publication
–University of Georgia 2002
Dear Friend:

SENIOR SENSE is a quarterly publication provided by your local county Extension Service office. It is prepared by Extension Family & Consumer Sciences specialists at The University of Georgia specifically for the educational needs of older Georgians.

Please contact your local Extension Service office for more information on these and related topics.

Contributors to this issue:

Janine Freeman, RD, LD, CDE, Extension Education Program Specialist
Patrice Dollar, CFP, Extension Financial Management Specialist and Michael Crook, Intern, HCE
Don Bower, DPA, CFCS, Extension Human Development Specialist