

Do your patients believe these 7 myths about salt?

AUG 6, 2019

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Americans have acquired a taste for a high salt diet due to eating processed foods, with adults consuming more than 3,400 mg of sodium per day—more than the 2,300 mg limit recommended by the American Heart Association (AHA). The recommended limit lowers based on age, race or ethnicity, or existing high blood pressure. To help patients lower the amount of salt they are consuming, physicians and their teams need to dispel seven common myths related to sodium intake.

Most of the sodium in a person's diet comes from packaged, processed foods. Minimizing the consumption of these foods can reduce sodium intake, lower BP and prevent hypertension from developing in the first place.

Myth: Eliminate sodium completely for good health. Sodium is an essential nutrient that controls blood pressure. It is also needed to make nerves and muscles work properly. For this reason, patients need to consume the right amount. The AHA recommends no more than 2,300 milligrams a day, but patients should move toward an ideal limit of no more than 1,500 mg per day for most adults. Even cutting back by 1,000 milligrams a day can significantly improve BP and heart health.

Myth: Sea salt has less sodium than table salt. Sea salt has surpassed table salt in popularity. However, it is not any less salty. Both salts contain 40% sodium. Patients can let their taste buds choose between types of salt, but they all contain about the same amount of sodium. Physicians can recommend patients avoid adding table salt to food.

Myth: I usually don't salt my food, so I don't eat too much sodium. More than 75% of sodium Americans consume comes from packaged, prepared and restaurant foods. That is why it is important for patients to compare nutrition facts, labels and serving sizes.

Myth: High levels of sodium are found only in food. Some over-the-counter medications contain high levels of sodium. Physicians should encourage patients to carefully read drug labels. It is also important to note that some companies produce low-sodium, over-the-counter products.

Myth: Lower sodium foods have no taste. There is a variety of creative and flavorful alternatives to salt. Patients should experiment with spices, herbs and citrus to enhance the natural flavor of their food. For example, making recipes in a slow cooker or pressure cooker can reduce sodium intake while maximizing flavor.

Myth: My blood pressure is normal, so I don't need to worry about how much sodium I eat. The AHA recommends consuming less than 1,500 mg of sodium daily. Even for people who don't have high BP, less sodium will significantly blunt the rise in blood pressure that occurs with age. Consuming less sodium will also reduce the risk of patients developing other conditions, such as kidney disease.

Myth: I don't eat a lot of salty food so I don't eat too much sodium. Patients often consume more sodium than they realize. Just because they don't think they are eating a lot of salty food does not mean they are safe from too much sodium. Patients should watch out for poultry, cheese and bread. These foods can have excess sodium that can increase the risk for heart disease and stroke.

The AMA has developed online tools and resources created using the latest evidence-based information to support physicians to help manage their patients' high BP. These resources are available to all physicians and health systems as part of Target: BP™, a national initiative co-led by the AMA and AHA.