Too Much or Too Little Sodium Is Unhealthy

Q. I always hear that getting too much sodium is bad for my health, but is it also possible to get too little sodium?

A. Yes. For your body to function, you need 500 milligrams of sodium a day. It’s required by the body for transmitting nerve impulses, helping muscles (including the heart) contract and maintaining the body’s acid-base and fluid balance.

However, considering you can get that much sodium from just ¼ teaspoon of salt, it’s not surprising that a low intake is hardly a problem in the U.S. After all, the average sodium intake for Americans is about 3,000 to 5,000 milligrams a day. Experts currently recommend a limit of less than 2,400 milligrams a day to reduce the risk of high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. Some experts think it should be even lower.

Moderate Sodium Risky? What about sodium intakes that fall between the minimum of 500 and the 2,400 maximum? That’s where the waters get a bit murky. While the prevailing philosophy is the lower the better, not everyone agrees with this sodium party line. A few researchers, including Hillel Cohen, Dr.P.H., of Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City, have compared sodium intakes with death rates from cardiovascular disease using government survey data and have uncovered a provocative link.

**Provocative Findings.** Cohen and colleagues found that getting less than 2,922 milligrams of sodium a day was associated with a greater risk of death than getting more. He argues that most research shows only a modest link between disease and sodium intake; Cohen believes it’s a leap of logic the science does not support. He says that even if lower sodium intakes don’t raise the risk disease or death, his findings suggest that higher sodium intakes don’t increase risk either.

**EN’s Bottom Line.** So, what to do? **EN’s stance continues to be that some people likely are more affected by sodium than others, and since we don’t know who they are, cutting back on sodium is a good thing. Keep in mind that Cohen looked only at cardiovascular disease and overall death rate, not other diseases and how they might affect quality of life. There is newfound interest in sodium’s negative effect on bone health, adding another reason to limit salt.**

But, too little sodium? Face it; that’s likely not an issue for any American.

Erythritol Sweeteners Stand Out from the Pack, With Benefits to Boot

Q. I’ve noticed some products list erythritol as a sweeter. Is it safe?

A. Yes. Erythritol is a compound known as a polyol, specifically a sugar alcohol. But despite that moniker, it doesn’t contain sugar nor will it make you tipsy. Other polyols familiar to label readers include sorbitol, xylitol, isomalt, lactitol, maltitol and mannitol.

Polyols are a type of carbohydrate, so they provide calories, but they aren’t sugars, so products using them can be called “sugar-free.” While all polyols are lower in calories than table sugar, erythritol is much lower. It is virtually calorie-free (0.2 calories per gram; sugar provides 4 calories, sorbitol 2.6 and xylitol 2.4).

The Food and Drug Administration declared erythritol safe more than a decade ago. However, it’s only now being used extensively in products like chewing gum, candy, ice cream, baked goods and fruit spreads, as well as in some oral care and cold products.

**Pros and One Con of Erythritol.**

Some products use 100% erythritol (Zerose), but many blend it with other sweeteners. Why? Cost. Erythritol is found naturally in fruits like pears, melons and grapes. For commercial production, companies ferment carbohydrates—often sugar, ironically. It ends up 70% as sweet as table sugar, with no aftertaste. But it’s costly.

The good news is that research indicates erythritol is safe, even when it makes up 20% of the diet in animal studies. Once it enters the body and is digested, 90% is excreted virtually unchanged. In fact, it is the only polyol that is digested almost entirely in the large intestine, not the small intestines, where most nutrients (including carbohydrates) are absorbed. That explains why it is lower in calories and is less likely to cause diarrhea than other polyols.

Melamine: A Concern?

Q. Should I be concerned that my foods and drinks might be contaminated with melamine?

A. For now, melamine appears to be a major problem only in China, though it has been found in products exported from China to 13 other countries. The FDA recently cracked down on the entry of all food products from China containing milk, after finding evidence of melamine contamination. The contaminated products are found mostly in ethnic stores, but any milk-containing product from China is suspect. The only serious problem in the U.S. occurred last year, when a few pet foods were contaminated with the chemical, causing some pet deaths.

Melamine is used to make Formica, floor tiles and melamine dishware, popular in the 1950s. So, why is it in food at all? Because melamine is cheap and rich in nitrogen—an important component of protein—prompting unscrupulous Chinese companies to turn a profit by adding it to watered-down milk, making it appear richer in protein.

**EN’s Bottom Line.** While the horrific melamine miasma isn’t a major problem in the U.S. yet, only time will tell. **EN will keep you informed.**