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Can you cut back on salt?

A small reduction in salt goes a long way in preventing diseases.

SODIUM is one of the essential minerals our body needs to survive.

It plays a major role in many physiological processes such as maintaining water balance, contraction and relaxation of muscles, conduction of nerve impulses, and many more.

With sodium playing such a vital role in our body, it is important for us to replenish this mineral through our diet.

Sodium is naturally found in many foods such as whole grains, nuts, packaged and processed foods (where sodium is added during processing), and also in table salt – the most common source.

Salt is a compound made up of two minerals, sodium and chloride.

Despite sodium being an essential mineral in our body, the amount we really need to take in through our diet is much less than you may think.

The Recommended Nutrient Intakes for Malaysia (RNI) states that adult should limit intake to 1,500mg of sodium per day (about two-thirds of a teaspoon of salt) and much lower for children.

Additionally, as salt is a common source of sodium that is ubiquitously used in many of our daily foods, the World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended that each adult should have a salt intake of less than 5g per day (about one teaspoon,



Train yourself to read food labels and check the sodium content before purchasing the product. — AFP

Morbidity Survey 2019, which reported that three out of 10 Malaysian adults have hypertension!

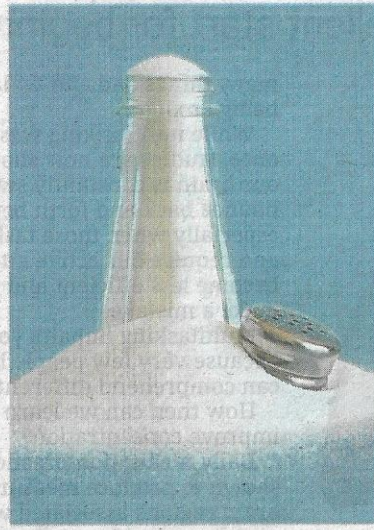
This high prevalence may not be surprising as it has been found that the average salt intake among Malaysians was 7.9g (1.6 teaspoons) per day.

This intake is way above WHO's

You may also find it useful to save salt seasoning until the last step of cooking.

This way, you can taste the food before adding additional salt.

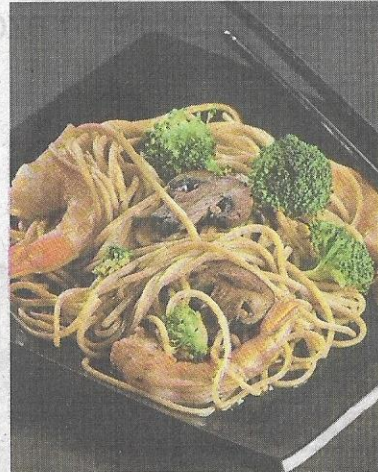
Finally, limit the use of salty condiments in cooking (e.g. cured meats, pickles, salted eggs, paste, soybean paste, shrimp paste, soya sauce, etc.).



A high sodium intake can cause an increase in thirst, water retention and loss of calcium.

with less sodium such as monosodium glutamate (MSG) can be used to reduce the usage of salt without compromising on taste.

MSG is an amino acid found naturally in protein-containing foods that provides the umami (a blend of sweet, sour, bitter and salty) taste in the food.



This healthy dish offers two main sources of umami, which are mushrooms and tamari (that milder version of soy sauce). — Photos: TNS

aged foods, compare the sodium content per 100g, and choose the product that is lower in sodium/salt content.

It may take some time for us to gradually reduce our salt intake, but once our taste buds get used to less salt, we are more likely to enjoy foods with a broader range of fla-

which contains around 2,000 mg of sodium).

More salt, more (health) problems

High sodium intake can bring a range of negative health effects towards non-communicable disease i.e. it increases the risk of high blood pressure (hypertension), which is a major risk factor for many health conditions like heart disease, stroke and chronic kidney disease.

In addition, high sodium intake can also cause short-term health consequences such as an increase in thirst, water retention and loss of calcium.

The negative health effects of excessive sodium intake on the Malaysian population is evidenced from the National Health and

recommendation.

Adjust your taste buds

So, how can you avoid the negative health consequences of high sodium intake?

It's really quite simple.

A small change to cut salt intake in your diet goes a long way in helping to prevent diseases.

Reducing salt intake to less than 5g per day (about one teaspoon) helps to reduce blood pressure and risk of cardiovascular diseases, heart attacks and strokes.

A great way to start is through using less salt when cooking.

Of course, a sudden and drastic reduction in salt can make foods seem relatively less tasty, therefore it is advisable to gradually reduce the amount of salt used when cooking.

Many believe that reducing salt will remove flavour from the cooking.

However, there are ways to boost flavour while keeping sodium levels low.

> Use natural flavour enhancing ingredients

This includes spices (black pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, etc), herbs (basil, parsley, coriander, etc), fruits (mango, orange, apple, etc) or vegetables (garlic, onion, ginger, etc).

These natural flavour enhancers also have nutritional benefits.

> Incorporate natural umami-rich ingredients to boost taste

For example, tomatoes, kelp, dried seaweed, anchovies, seafood, Chinese cabbage and dried or fresh mushrooms.

Alternatively, umami seasonings

Contrary to what many think, MSG contains two thirds less sodium compared to table salt – meaning that by merely reducing half of the salt and adding on MSG, you can enjoy the same delicious taste with a fraction of the salt intake.

Choose pre-packaged products wisely

In the current fast-paced environment, it is clear that the dietary patterns of many have changed to favour quick and calorie-dense meals high in salt, sugar, fats and oils.

Consequently, pre-packaged foods have become a staple for many.

This is alarming as these processed pre-packaged foods may contain a high amount of salt.

Therefore, it is imperative to read the food labels of different pre-pack-

vours.

More importantly, a lesser sodium intake helps to prevent high blood pressure and the other health complications it brings.

It is up to us to take action early for better health in the future.

Assoc Prof Dr Chin Yit Siew & Dr Roseline Yap are nutritionists. Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2022 is an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, the Malaysian Dietitians' Association and the Malaysian Society of Body Composition. The NMM 2022 Virtual Nutrition Fair is currently ongoing until July 31. Visit virtual-fair.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my to register, and the NMM Facebook and Instagram pages for more information