

GET THE FACTS:

Sodium's Role in Processed Food



What Do Sodium and Processed Food Have to Do with Heart Health?

Eating too much sodium can lead to increased blood pressure, which in turn contributes to heart disease and stroke. Reducing sodium intake to recommended amounts is important to maintaining heart health.

It may surprise you to learn that more than 70% of the sodium Americans consume comes from processed and restaurant foods. Only a small amount comes from the salt shaker, either during home cooking or at the dinner table.

Processed Food: A Definition

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration defines “processed food” as “any food other than a raw agricultural commodity and includes any raw agricultural commodity that has been subject to processing, such as canning, cooking, freezing, dehydration, or milling.” By this definition, nearly all food served in restaurants and many grocery store products are considered processed.



Here are a few other ways to think about processed food:

- A processed food is any food that has been changed from its original, raw form.
- Processing a food often involves the use of added ingredients, including sodium-containing additives, which could make the product less healthy.

“From Scratch” Versus “Processed”—Are They Always Different?

Americans’ use of packaged food has increased in the past 50 years. Many of the ingredients that we now use when we cook “from scratch” at home are processed in some way.

- Many processed foods at the grocery store are easy to identify—in general, anything with a Nutrition Facts label on the package has been processed.
- Frozen meals, snack foods like chips and cookies, and most beverages have been processed.
- Such staples as sugar, flour, chicken broth, and canned or frozen vegetables have also been processed in some way.
- Products that use labels such as “all natural” or “whole grain” are still processed.
- “Processed” can mean many different things, but not all of these foods are bad for your health. Products such as frozen vegetables are often still low in sodium. That’s why it’s important to check Nutrition Facts labels and choose the option lower in sodium.

More than 70% of the sodium Americans consume comes from processed and restaurant foods—not the salt shaker.

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How Much Sodium Should I Eat?

The 2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that Americans consume less than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium each day as part of a healthy eating plan.

If So Much Food Is Processed, What Can I Do to Cut Sodium?

- At the grocery store or farmers' market, purchase whole, unprocessed foods when available, such as fresh vegetables and meats.

- Similar products can vary greatly in sodium content. When purchasing processed foods, compare labels and choose the option with the least amount of sodium.
- Cook at home more, and use as many fresh ingredients as possible.
- Scale back how often you eat restaurant food, which is frequently high in sodium.
- Request nutrition information when dining out, and ask your server about lower sodium options.
- Whether eating out or in, eat less. Reducing portion sizes can help limit how much salt you eat.

Learn more at www.cdc.gov/salt



To reduce sodium in home cooking, season foods with fresh herbs and spices instead of salt.

For more information please contact Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road NE, Atlanta, GA 30333
Telephone: 1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)/TTY: 1-888-232-6348
E-mail: cdcinfo@cdc.gov • Web: www.cdc.gov
Publication date: 10/2017