

Heart Failure: How to Limit Your Sodium



Sodium causes your body to hold extra water. Reducing sodium (salt) in your diet can help you feel better, lower your risk of having to go to the hospital, and increase your quality of life. Lowering your sodium will make it easier to live with heart failure.

People get most of their sodium from salt in foods. Your doctor may limit your sodium to less than 2,000 milligrams (mg) a day.

Keep track of all of your food and drink each day, and learn what foods to avoid. There is "hidden salt" in most foods. For example, 1 cup of milk has 130 mg of sodium.

Why it is important to limit sodium

Limiting sodium will make you feel better. Too much sodium makes it harder for your already-weakened heart to pump and can lead to sudden heart failure. Fluid may build up in your lungs-making it harder for you to breathe-and in your feet, ankles, legs, and belly.

How to limit sodium in your diet

Learn to count the milligrams of sodium in everything you eat.

If you eat one high-sodium food, you can balance it with very low-sodium foods during the rest of the day. You can learn to choose lower-sodium foods by comparing food labels for the sodium content.

Read food and drug labels:

- Read food labels on cans and food packages. To check how much sodium is in a food, look on the nutrition label for the sodium in milligrams. Make sure that you look at the serving size. If you eat more than the serving size, you have eaten more sodium. For example, compare the following foods:
 - Tomatoes, canned, **low-sodium**, ½ cup: 15 mg to 30 mg sodium
 - Tomatoes, canned, ½ cup: 220 mg to 350 mg sodium
- Food labels also tell you the Percent Daily Value. If the Percent Daily Value says 50%, it means that you will get at least 50% of all the sodium a person without heart failure needs for the entire day in one serving. Choose products with low Percent Daily Values for sodium.
- Be aware that sodium can be "hidden" and come in forms other than salt, including monosodium glutamate (MSG), sodium citrate, and sodium bicarbonate (baking soda). MSG is often added to Asian food. You can sometimes ask for food without MSG or salt.
- Check your medicines. Some drugs, especially over-the-counter drugs, contain sodium. Talk with your doctor or pharmacist to find out whether a prescription or over-the-counter medicine has sodium in it.

Buy low-sodium foods:

- Buy foods that are labeled "unsalted" (no salt added), "sodium-free" (less than 5 mg of sodium per serving), or "low-sodium" (less than 140 mg of sodium per serving). A food labeled "light sodium" has less than half of the full-sodium version of that food. Foods labeled "reduced-sodium" may still have too much sodium.
- Buy fresh vegetables or plain frozen ones. Buy low-sodium versions of canned vegetables, soups, and other canned goods. Avoid TV dinners and other frozen prepared foods.
- When you eat a meal in a restaurant, ask if your food can be made without salt. Order fresh fruits and vegetables when you can. Take your own low-sodium salad dressing with you.

Prepare low-sodium meals:

- Take the saltshaker off the table. Flavor your food with garlic, lemon juice, onion, vinegar, herbs, and spices instead of salt. Do not use soy sauce, steak sauce, onion salt, garlic salt, mustard, or ketchup on your food.
- Make your own salad dressings, sauces, and ketchup without adding salt.
- Use less salt (or none) when recipes call for it. You can often use half the salt a recipe calls for without losing flavor. Other dishes like rice, pasta, and grains do not need added salt.
- Rinse canned vegetables. This removes some-but not all-of the salt.
- Avoid water that has a naturally high sodium content or that has been treated with water softeners, which add sodium. Call your local water company to find out the sodium

content of your water supply. If you buy bottled water, read the label and choose a sodium-free brand.

- Talk to your doctor about using a salt substitute.

Foods to avoid

Avoid high-sodium foods, such as:

- Smoked, cured, salted, and canned meat, fish, and poultry.
- Ham, bacon, hot dogs, and luncheon meats.
- Regular, hard, and processed cheese and regular peanut butter.
- Crackers with salted tops.
- Frozen prepared meals.
- Canned and dried soups, broths, and bouillon, unless they are labeled sodium-free or low-sodium.
- Canned vegetables, unless they are labeled sodium-free or low-sodium.
- Salted snack foods such as chips and pretzels.
- Pickles, olives, ketchup, and other condiments, especially soy sauce, unless they are labeled sodium-free or low-sodium.
- French fries, pizza, tacos, and other fast foods.

Questions to ask your doctor

Questions about heart failure and limiting sodium: