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Sue Ann Says: Sodium – Can't Live with It; Can't Live without It

I'll admit it: I salt my watermelon. The mix of that sweet juicy fruit along with the slight saltiness is divine. It's the yin and the yang. And yet the little voice inside my head says, "Knock it off, Sue Ann; just enjoy the fruit and leave the salt shaker on the table." The voice continues, "In fact, get rid of that salt shaker all together!"

Now, I know from my years in women's health that sodium, which we mostly consume in the form of salt, plays an important role in maintaining the body's fluid balance. It's essential for muscles and nerves to function properly. But, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently came out with startling statistics that 90% of Americans are eating too much salt – in fact, we get twice the recommended sodium intake – about 3,400 milligrams. This is not good news – and it really made me sit up and take notice.

How much sodium is OK?

The CDC guidelines recommend no more than 2,400 mg of sodium per day – equal to about one teaspoon of table salt. However those with high blood pressure, all African Americans and everyone over 40 (that's 70% of Americans, folks) should get less than 1,500 mg of sodium per day.

Where's all that sodium coming from?

Oddly enough, it's not the salt shaker that's doing it. An estimated 77% comes from sodium in processed, store bought, and restaurant foods. (We all know how swollen our fingers get after eating Chinese food.) The worst foods? Yeast bread, chicken and mixed chicken dinners, pizza, pasta dishes, and deli meats. The small frozen chicken meal a WWHF staffer popped in the microwave today contained 590 mg of sodium!

Grains used in breads, grain-based frozen meals, soups, and pizza (the crust is mostly salty bread) contribute 37% of our daily sodium.

Meats, including poultry and fish contribute 28% of our sodium.

Vegetables contribute 12%. But guess what? French fries and potato chips were considered vegetables in the CDC study, so go figure. Add in canned vegetables, vegetable soups, and vegetable sauces and you can see why our sodium levels are through the roof.

What is sodium doing to our health?

Plenty. Eating high amounts of sodium raises our blood pressure and high blood pressure is a major risk for heart disease and stroke, the first and third leading causes of death in the U.S. One in three U.S. adults has high blood pressure, and the government estimates that nine in ten will develop it in their lifetime.

I'm concerned that this short paragraph won't convince you of the terrible health effects of too much sodium, so I'll state it again...Excess sodium in our foods (especially processed and frozen foods) can lead to high blood pressure which can lead to heart disease, heart attack, and stroke.

How can we reduce our sodium intake?

I'm not going to kid you...it's hard to do. Americans, including me, have developed quite a taste for the stuff. But there are steps you can take when grocery shopping and preparing your food that will help you drastically reduce your intake of sodium.

When you're grocery shopping:

- Shop the perimeter of the grocery store and purchase fresh or frozen veggies and fruits, dairy, and unprocessed fish, poultry and fish. Avoid sodium laden deli meats. Instead, purchase a fresh turkey breast, grill or roast it, and slice it for sandwiches and salads.
- Check food labels for the amount of sodium per serving and compare sodium content by brand; they can vary.
- Choose low, reduced-sodium, or no salt added products, especially canned soups, vegetables and meat, and frozen foods. Rinse canned foods, such as tuna and vegetables to remove some of the salt.
- Cut back on frozen dinners, pizza, packaged mixes and salad dressings.
- Ask restaurants to prepare your food without salt.
- Limit salty snacks.
- Select low-sodium, low-fat cheeses.

Consider these delicious ideas when preparing your food:

- Try salt-free spice blends such as Italian seasoning on vegetables or pasta, Cajun blends on chicken, Southwestern in brown rice and beans or Caribbean on fish.
- Sprinkle chopped fresh herbs such as parsley, dill, cilantro, chives or basil on top of your cooked food to add fresh flavor.
- Use flavorful cooking methods such as grilling, sautéing or slow cooking to bring out flavor.
- Add fresh lemon juice instead of salt to fish and vegetables.

It may take some time for us to get used to less sodium in our meals, but eventually our taste buds will adjust. Let's start now by making small changes at first, and working to gradually lower our families' sodium intake.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, early detection; connects individuals to health resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.