

Health Focus Article
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Shaking Out Sodium and Potassium

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In the modern age of “on the go” eating, most people struggle to balance eating fast and eating well. You might imagine a balance of most people’s diet.

On one side place all the high-sodium prepared foods you eat on a regular basis—a can of chicken soup, chips, crackers, a frozen dinner. You should add to that side of the balance every meal you eat from a restaurant or take-out counter.

On the other side, place all potassium-rich fruits and vegetables you eat regularly--bananas, apricots, oranges, spinach, acorn squash, cantaloupe. Whole grain breads and cereals also belong on this side. At this point, if you’re at all typical, your scales are heavily weighted in favor of sodium. To even things out a bit, you can add potatoes to the potassium side. Unfortunately, fast food fries come with so much salt that they belong on the other side of the scale.

Sodium and potassium are out of balance in the American diet, and, as a result, one of every three adults has high blood pressure, a major risk factor for stroke, heart attack and heart failure.

If you’re worried about high blood pressure—and you should be, whether you’re diagnosed with it or not—one look at the imaginary scales above will give you a very simple solution: you need to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables and less processed convenience foods.

Sodium and potassium are minerals that the body needs, and they basically work in opposition to each other to maintain a proper fluid balance in cells and control blood pressure.

Our ancestors centuries ago, who subsisted on foods they could hunt or gather, ate a diet providing 5 to 10 times as much potassium as sodium—a healthy ratio. Dietary guidelines today recommend a potassium/sodium ratio of 2:1 to 3:1; yet the typical American diet actually has those ratios reversed.

The kidneys correct the imbalance...but at a price—fluid retention, an increase in blood pressure, calcium loss and a risk of heart disease, osteoporosis and other chronic diseases.

The first part of the equation is sodium restriction. It’s an important part of treatment and prevention of high blood pressure and should be a priority for all Americans. The recommended level for healthy adults is 2,300 milligrams a day, and the Institute of Medicine recommends even less—1,500 milligrams a day.

Given the large proportion of packaged foods in the diet, that's a formidable task.

As a preservative, salt is used generously in canned vegetables, beans and soups. And the sodium content of deli turkey is similar to that of ham. Those who process and prepare foods also know that extra salt is bound to make the dish more appealing.

Supermarket shopping requires vigilant label reading. When you're eating out, inquire about how food is prepared. But the only way to really be assured of eating less sodium is to eat as many meals at home as possible. Prepare food from scratch and use herbs, spices, pepper, lemon and garlic for seasoning.

In addition to the added sodium, food processing tends to destroy whatever potassium was in the food originally. Potassium levels are highest in fresh foods.

The effectiveness of the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet can be attributed in part to its high potassium content.

The diet calls for five servings a day of both fruits and vegetables—most of which are high not only in potassium but calcium, magnesium and other essential vitamins and minerals. A baked sweet potato provides 694 milligrams of potassium; a half cup of winter squash has 448.

DASH calls for generous portions of whole grains, nuts and legumes. A half cup of white beans will give you 595 milligrams of potassium. And liberal quantities of low-fat dairy products, such as non-fat yogurt (595 milligrams per 8 ounces).

Studies have found the DASH diet more effective than sodium restriction alone in lowering blood pressure. A combination of the DASH diet and sodium restriction is even more effective. In addition, several large population-based studies have found that persons eating a potassium-rich diet had a substantially reduced risk of stroke.

Getting enough potassium should not be difficult because the mineral is prevalent in many foods. Too much cooking and too much processing tends to destroy it, however. And too much sodium tends to deplete the body's supply. The answer is simple: to keep the nutrition scales in a healthy balance, choose foods that are fresh, whole and natural.

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