

# Food is



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## **Food is Medicine: Focus on Sodium**

Food is an important part of health. More often than not, when we think of taking care of our health, we think of getting to the hospital to see a healthcare provider, getting some laboratory investigations done or getting medications to treat a condition. We often do not consider the food we eat as an important part of our health. However, food is medicine.

The cells, tissues and organs of our bodies wear out because of environmental influences, genetic predisposition, aging and many other factors. There are factors around us that we cannot control that affect our health. One factor we can control is what we eat or do not eat. Food plays a significant role in our health status. Food can reduce the amount of medications we have to take if we need to at all.

Many chronic conditions are related to diet. The most common include diabetes, hypertension, and obesity. These conditions predispose to many other health problems such as stroke, heart attack, heart failure and renal diseases. These and many more reduce the quality of life. The sodium content of the food we eat, the saturated fat content and the added sugar content can determine whether we are healthy or not.

## **Sodium and Hypertension**

Anywhere sodium goes, water follows. Sodium is one of the major electrolytes in our body. We consume excess of it from table salt in food and preservatives, particularly in canned foods. When the sodium in food gets absorbed in the body and gets to the blood, it does so with lots of water. This puts too much work load on the heart which is responsible for pumping blood across the body. This can contribute to the development of hypertension (high blood pressure). According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, there is increased risk of developing high blood pressure with increased consumption of food with high sodium content.

According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, it is important to limit sodium intake to less than 2300 mg per day. The American Heart Association states that the body needs less than 500mg of sodium daily (less than 1/4 of teaspoon) to function properly. However, on average, Americans eat more than 3400mg of sodium each day. This is about five times more than what is needed by the body. It is therefore important to reduce the content of sodium we consume.

## **Tips to Reducing Sodium Intake**

1. Pay attention to the food labels of processed and prepared food such as Pizza, soup, pasta dishes and many others. According to the FDA, food labels with < 5% Daily value (DV) are considered low in sodium. Those with daily value > 20% are considered high in sodium.
2. Choose food whose labels show they contain low sodium.
3. Reduce your portion size. The less food you eat, the less sodium you consume.
4. Eat more fresh fruits and vegetables as they have less or no sodium. Many of them are also rich in potassium that helps to reduce the effect of sodium in the body.
5. Prepare your food. One way to control the sodium you eat is to select foods low in sodium and prepare them yourself.

Whether you have been diagnosed with hypertension or not, restricting your sodium intake is a healthy plan. Starting today, look at food labels, choose food with low sodium, buy the ones with lower than 250mg sodium or 5% or less daily value of sodium, exercise to lose some weight and stay healthy. Food is medicine and if we consume a lot of sodium in our diet, we are more likely to require a counter medicine to reduce high blood pressure.