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WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2016 - VOL. CCLXVIII NO. 75

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HOME & DIGITAL

Cooks Shake Their Heads Over Guidelines on Salt

Does this taste too salty?
Adjustments may be
necessary with new limits

By KATHLEEN SQUIRES

New guidelines to reduce salt in Americans' diets have left many cooks in a pickle (a high-sodium snack, by the way).

Many home cooks wonder how to tell if the amount of salt they habitually use is unhealthy and how they might cut back. Professional chefs also are befuddled by the changing advice. "Are we all going to be tasked with hiring somebody to come in and test salt levels?" asks chef Marco Canora of the New York City restaurant Hearth. Salt isn't something that is often measured, he says. "Cooks in kitchens salt-taste and add a lot a minute."

The Food and Drug Administration released new draft guidance for reducing salt in commercial and processed foods in June. The recommendations call for Americans to reduce their sodium intake to 2,300 milligrams a day, compared with the current daily average of 3,400 milligrams. People who have hypertension, or are at risk for it, should reduce their intake even further to 1,500 milligrams a day, the FDA says.

This summer, New York City put fines into effect for chain restaurants that fail to comply with a citywide regulation requiring menu warnings for items with 2,300 milligrams of sodium or more per serving.

To put that in perspective, there are 2,300 milligrams of sodium in a teaspoon of table salt.

The American Heart Association, World Health Organization, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention support such warnings, citing the link between high sodium intake and hypertension, heart disease and stroke.

Other experts disagree. Recent studies published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and *JAMA Internal Medicine* and a report by the Institute of Medicine question whether limiting sodium intake offsets cardiovascular risk and whether sodium reduction is beneficial at all for healthy people.

According to the CDC, 75% of sodium in the American diet comes from dining out, prepared foods



How Much Salt Is Too Much?

Dr. Michelle Hauser, of Stanford University School of Medicine, suggests a way home cooks can salt to taste, without oversalting. Start by preparing 2 to 3 quarts of beef-and-bean chili with no added salt.

Use a spoon to taste: note the sensation in your mouth. You might taste a bit of salt because of canned tomatoes, tomato sauce or beans. But mainly, taste the flavors of meat, beans and spices.

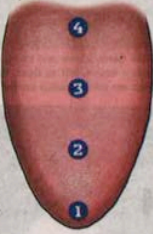
Zone 1: Add ¼ teaspoon of salt and stir. If you taste the salty intensity only at the tip of the tongue, the dish is undersalted.

Zone 2: Add another ¼ teaspoon of salt and stir. If you taste the salt a bit farther back on the tongue, it still isn't quite salty enough. Take a sip of water.

Zone 3: Add a third ¼ teaspoon of salt and stir. If you taste the salt in the middle of the tongue, you've hit the right amount of salt.

Zone 4: If you add another ¼ teaspoon, you'll taste it at the back of the tongue—and you'll be in danger of oversalting the dish. Add even more and you'll probably feel it in your whole mouth and at the back of the throat—a clear sign of too much.

Your salt target is somewhere between zones 3 and 4, not at the tip of the tongue nor at the back near the throat. For a 2- to 3-quart pot of chili, the optimal amount of salt to add is probably from ¾ to 1 whole teaspoon, with a maximum of 1½ teaspoons.



and processed foods. By comparison, only 5% of sodium comes from salt added during the home-cooking process, and 6% comes from salt added at the table. So simply cooking at home with fresh ingredients can be a big step toward reducing sodium intake.

"The best way to lower sodium is to cook everything from scratch so that you have complete control," advises chef Andy Bennett of the soon to reopen Rouge Tomato Chelsea, a New York City restaurant with a registered dietician on staff. "By using quality ingredients that taste great to begin with, the need to add that extra bit of salt is negated by their [inherent] flavor."

Kristy Del Coro, Rouge Tomato Chelsea's dietician, suggests limiting the number of salty elements, such as anchovies, capers, olives or pickles, in a meal. She recommends balancing high-sodium ingredients with high-potassium ingredients, such as leafy greens, potatoes and beans, because potassium helps offset the negative effects of sodium by regulating blood pressure.

There are a few easy ways to lower sodium intake at home, without becoming obsessed with tracking milligrams and without banning the salt shaker, says Michelle Hauser, a physician, certified chef and postdoctoral re-

search fellow in cardiovascular-disease prevention at Stanford Prevention Research Center.

"If you are trying to make one quick change, switching from granulated salt to a flaked sea salt could cut the sodium you're putting on your food in half," Dr. Hauser says. "Flaky sea salt, for example, weighs half as much per teaspoon as regular granulated salt," she says. With larger crystals, including coarse kosher salt, you end up with less sodium per pinch or per teaspoon.

Still, consider your particular health needs and those of your dinner guests, Dr. Hauser says. "If you have high blood pressure or if

you are at risk of developing high blood pressure, or you have a specific disease that requires low sodium intake, then those home cooks need to watch their sodium," she says.

When cooking at home, Kathy Fang, chef and co-owner of Fang, a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco, incorporates fresh herbs, spices, chilies, ginger, scallion, onion, garlic and acids such as vinegars and citrus juice to give pops of flavor to her cooking without the saltiness. She also recommends low-sodium soy sauce and salt-free seasoning mixes of herbs and spices.

It helps to limit well-known sodium-rich foods, from savory crunchy snacks and cured meats to prepared stocks and canned soups. Some high-sodium foods are a surprise. Milk, bread, bottled salad dressing, canned tomatoes and beans, cereal and shellfish also are often high in sodium. Some fresh meat, such as poultry, may be injected with sodium solutions.

Mr. Canora, of Hearth restaurant, recommends using fresh tomatoes instead of canned, buying organic meats and making your own stocks and vinaigrettes to reduce sodium consumption. He also suggests using sea salt and artisanal salts, which may have more diverse mineral content than the sodium and chloride found in mineral salt. "You are getting other minerals from those salts as well and they have a stronger flavor, so you don't have to use as much," Mr. Canora says.

The body needs a certain amount of sodium, so don't overdo salt reduction unless you are on a severe sodium-restricted diet for medical reasons, Dr. Hauser cautions. Sodium is an electrolyte, which helps the body maintain hydration.

"Our bodies need at least 180 milligrams to 550 milligrams of sodium per day," she says. If we don't get that, "there can be negative health consequences" including insulin resistance and cardiovascular-disease risk. A safe bet, she says, is to make sure intake doesn't go below 1,500 milligrams a day for young adults and people who perspire heavily; 1,300 milligrams for most other adults; and 1,200 milligrams for adults over age 70. "I believe that good-quality salt, like good-quality fat, is essential for good health," says Mr. Canora.