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Guidelines for salt consider the risk

By Kathy Kolasa

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Q: I heard there are new salt guidelines. What can you tell us? KC, Greenville

A: Kathryn Clary, a Brody medical student has a very fine answer for you. Here is what she wants you to know.

In order to keep our bodies alive, we humans need a few things: water, air and food. In order to stay healthy, our food must have the right amount of nutrients. Protein is an example of a nutrient that we need in large amounts. Sodium is an example of a nutrient that we need in small amounts. But how small

is small? And what happens if you don't eat the right amount of nutrients?

For people without any health problems, the suggested amount is less than 2,300 milligrams per day. You can find out how much sodium is in the food item by checking the nutrition label on the back of the package. Health experts came up with this number by looking at how much sodium healthy people are eating. They also found that eating more than 2,300 milligrams of salt per day increases the risk of heart disease and high blood pressure, even in people who are healthy. For people with chronic health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure or diabetes, it is always best to follow the advice given to you by your doctor. Let's talk a bit about why limiting salt is important for your health.

For the last 20 years, a group of professionals with backgrounds in nutrition and health called the National Academy of Medicine (NAM), have suggested how much of each nutrient the average person needs per day to stay healthy. In the past, they looked at how much of a nutrient is too little (inadequate) and how much of a nutrient is too much (toxic). Knowing how much is inadequate and how much is toxic gives us an idea of about how much of a nutrient is just enough. Sometimes the best way to come up with the "right" daily amount needed of a nutrient is to look at how much of that nutrient healthy people are eating. This is how the NAM decided how much sodium (salt) we should eat in a day.

Recently, NAM also looked at nutrients and their role in chronic disease, such as heart disease and high blood pressure. If you or someone you know has one of these conditions, you may have heard about a "salt diet," "salt restriction" or "low sodium diet." Eating less salt can help lower blood pressure putting less strain on your heart. It has been known for a long time that eating less salt can help people who already have high blood pressure or heart disease, but what about healthy people? Should you be watching how much salt you eat if you don't have these diseases?

NAM looked at sodium intake in healthy people – people who do not have high blood pressure or heart disease. They wanted to know if less sodium meant less risk for getting one of these diseases later in life (what they call "chronic disease risk reduction.") They found that healthy people who ate less sodium have a lower risk of getting diagnosed with heart disease and hypertension in the future.

Let's pause and talk about risk. We will use an example to better understand what risk means. Consider lung cancer: the risk of lung cancer is higher for someone who smokes cigarettes and lower for someone who does not smoke cigarettes. Just because Mr. Smith does not smoke cigarettes does not mean he cannot get lung cancer (there are people who have never smoked who get lung cancer), and just because Ms. Smith does smoke cigarettes does not mean she will absolutely get lung cancer (there are people who have smoked for many years who do not get lung cancer).

Risk just tells us the chances that something may or may not happen. For people who eat less sodium, there is a lower chance of developing high blood pressure and heart disease, and for people who eat more sodium, there is a higher chance of developing high blood pressure and heart disease.

NAM found that eating more than 2,300 milligrams of salt per day increases the risk of heart disease and high blood pressure, even in people who are healthy. It is important to realize that most adults in the U.S. eat far more than 2,300 mg of salt per day, and that is because salt is found in foods both naturally and as an added ingredient. Sometimes, even foods that don't taste salty have a lot of sodium.

So, what does all of this mean for you? It means that limiting the amount of salt you put on food or use while cooking is good for your health. For people without any health problems, the amount is less than 2,300 milligrams per day. For people with chronic health conditions, it is always best to follow your doctor's advice. Your registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN) can help you plan a health promoting eating plan.