

Script – Print – The Dangers of Hypertension

Do you really need that extra shake of salt on your fries? Because sodium is not your friend.

That's according to a study published in the Journal of Internal Medicine that showed any significant reduction in the consumption of dietary salt can improve hypertension.

"Hypertension is high blood pressure, or where our arteries are experiencing too much pressure with the blood flow to our organs, and this can lead to things like end organ damage, and some things that are really serious like stroke and heart attack," says Lauren Hargrave, a physician assistant with OSF HealthCare."

According to the American Heart Association (AHA), nine out of 10 Americans consume too much sodium and they don't even know it. The average person eats more than 3,400 milligrams (mg) of sodium a day – the AHA recommends no more than 2,300 mg a day. Ideally, it would be less than 1,500 mg a day, especially for adults with high blood pressure.

Reducing sodium by just 1,000 mg a day can improve blood pressure and decrease the risk of cardiac issues. The study also found that lower sodium consumption reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety in some study participants.

"Hypertension is a very big issue," says Hargrave. "It affects a lot of people across all ages. And it really is something that is not always recognized because people can be asymptomatic or not have any symptoms until they come in and see us."

Still, sodium is important to the human body. It helps control your body's fluid balance and is important to nerve and muscle function. But too much sodium can cause your body to retain water increase puffiness, cause weight gain and can lead to high blood pressure.

The ideal blood pressure for adults is a systolic pressure (top number) of less than 120 and a diastolic pressure (bottom number) of less than 80. According to the AHA, Hypertension Stage 1 is when blood pressure consistently ranges from 130-139 systolic or 80-89 diastolic, Hypertension Stage 2 is when blood pressure consistently ranges at 140/90 or higher, and a crisis occurs if your blood pressure readings suddenly exceed 180/120.

"A lot of times the first time people hear that they have high blood pressures is in an office visit after we take vitals," says Hargrave. "They don't always know that they have high blood pressure at home and we call it the silent killer because a lot of times it is something that's not presenting with symptoms. We're telling people that they have high blood pressure and explaining the importance of treatment. It is very treatable with medications with lifestyle changes, but if it's not recognized, that's when it can become dangerous."

The best way to reduce the sodium in your diet is to stay clear of prepackaged, processed and prepared foods. Pay close attention to food labels – foods that have the most salt are breads, pizza, sandwiches, cold cuts, soup and tacos.

Other foods that have "hidden" amounts of sodium are cheeses, canned vegetables, frozen dinners, snack foods, and condiments such as ketchup and mustard.

If you're cooking at home, avoid adding table salt to foods, flavor your meals with herbs, spices, lemon and lime. Opt for chicken, fish and lean meat rather than canned or processed meats, and rinse canned vegetables and beans to reduce the amount of sodium.

Restaurant meals are another source of high sodium. Study the menu before ordering, choose fresh fruits and vegetables when you can, ask for salad dressing on the side and request that your meal be prepared without added salt.

Exercise helps with overall heart health, which can help lower blood pressure. It also helps with weight reduction, which can also improve blood pressure. The key, according to medical experts, is paying attention to what you eat and make modifications when necessary.

“It can be potentially serious but it's treatable and manageable if you watch your salt intake and exercise and have a conversation with your doctor,” says Dr. Tianyu Dong, a family practice physician with OSF HealthCare.

For more information about hypertension, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).