SALT AND SODIUM—WHY THE AMOUNT YOU CONSUME DAILY REALLY DOES MATTER TO YOUR HEALTH

By: Dave Kraybill, Executive Director, Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation

You may be surprised to know that sodium intake is absolutely crucial in maintaining your health. We need sodium to transport nutrients, transmit nerve impulses and contract muscles—including your heart. Sodium also is a necessity for maintaining several kinds of equilibrium in the body—fluid balance, electrolyte balance and pH balance. Without sodium in our bodies we would cease to exist. So then, what’s all the fuss about consuming salt and sodium—we need it to live right? Well yes, but only 250 to 500mg each day. The American Dietetic Association estimates most Americans average 3,500 to 4,300mg each day—yes, those are the correct numbers.

However, contrary to belief, most of that average daily sodium number does not come from the salt we add to our food from the table shaker. The main sources of sodium include processed and prepared foods and condiments. In fact, even though the words salt and sodium are used interchangeably, there is a difference. Table salt is actually sodium chloride; it’s 40 percent sodium and 60 percent chloride. Less than 25 percent of the sodium American’s consume daily comes from table salt, and sodium that naturally occurs in food. The rest of the sodium consumed, almost 77 percent, comes from processed foods, cured meats (bacon, sausage, etc.), lunch meat, frozen entrees, canned vegetables, canned soup, fast food, sauces, condiments, and dressings.

**How Much Sodium is Enough?**
According to the American Heart Association (AHA), healthy Americans should try to eat less than 2,300mg of sodium per day. The AHA goes onto state that African Americans, middle-aged and older adults, and those with high blood pressure need less than 1,500mg per day. However, it is always best to consult your doctor to determine the daily sodium content that is best for you.

To put it in perspective, ¼ teaspoon of salt = 600mg sodium, ½ teaspoon of salt = 1,200mg sodium, ¾ teaspoon of salt = 1,800mg sodium, and 1 teaspoon of salt = 2,400mg sodium. It’s easy to see how you can exceed the recommended amount. You can determine the sodium content per serving by looking at a food’s nutrition label. If the sodium percentage per serving is not listed, read the ingredient list and look for the words monosodium glutamate (better known as MSG), baking soda, baking powder, disodium phosphate, sodium alginate, sodium nitrate, or any other compound that has sodium or “Na” in its name. This will indicate that even though the sodium percentage is not listed, there is added sodium.

**What Exactly is Iodized Salt?**
While table salt is a contributor to sodium in your diet, you may wonder about the significance of iodine in your table salt. If you read your salt label, it says “iodized salt.” But does iodized salt vs. salt without iodine make a difference in your amount of sodium intake with salt? No. Iodized salt is simply salt which has been fortified with the essential trace mineral iodine. Iodine has an important impact on the health of the thyroid gland. An unhealthy thyroid can lead to a number of unfortunate conditions.

The history of adding iodine to salt goes back to WWII when many young men from the Midwest were declared unfit for duty due to iodine deficiency. This led to a widespread movement to add iodine to salt. Some salt producers were initially reluctant, but by the mid-1920s, iodized salt was extremely common. The recommended daily allowance of iodine is 150 micrograms, and one teaspoon of iodized salt typically offers around 400 micrograms. However, if you eat a healthy diet, you can buy salt that does not have iodine added like sea salt especially if you prefer its texture and taste. Great sources of iodine naturally include seaweed, kelp, and other dark greens, cod, haddock, and other saltwater fish, shrimp, tuna packed in oil, eggs, navy beans, turkey breast, yogurt, mayonnaise, cheddar cheese, and baked potato with the skin.
The Effects of Sodium
Sodium in your body is needed for good health and you need a certain balance of sodium and water at all times. Too much sodium or too much water in your system will upset the balance, but when you are healthy, your kidneys get rid of extra sodium to keep the correct balance of sodium and water. However, if you have too much sodium in your system and your kidneys cannot eliminate enough, the sodium starts to accumulate in your blood. Because sodium attracts and holds water this causes your blood volume to increase, which causes your heart to work harder to move more blood through your blood vessels, increasing the pressure in your arteries. This can lead to or aggravate high blood pressure. According to the American Heart Association, people with high blood pressure are more likely to develop heart disease and stroke. Too much sodium in your system can also cause congestive heart failure, cirrhosis, chronic kidney disease, and water retention which translates into pounds on the scale.

Tips to Reduce Sodium Intake
The best place to start reducing your sodium intake is by being conscious of the nutrition label on the foods you buy—these labels will provide an eye-opening experience. For instance, most cereals are higher in sodium than potato chips. Also, leaving the salt shaker off the table will definitely help, but it will not greatly reduce your daily sodium intake. The following tips will make a significant difference for you and your family in reducing your sodium intake. Remember, you do not have to follow all tips right away—small, gradual steps will eventually lead to big changes in your health.

- **Eat More Fresh Foods and Fewer Processed Foods** - most fresh fruits and vegetables are naturally low in sodium. These are the best choices over the canned and frozen varieties. If you must use canned vegetables, rinse them before eating. Fresh meat is much lower in sodium than lunch meat or cured meats (e.g. bacon, sausage, ham, hot dogs, and corned beef); just check with your butcher that it hasn’t been injected with a sodium-solution.

- **Read Your Labels** – become very aware of the salt content in the food you are buying and be sure to realize that the sodium listed is per serving. Absolutely limit foods that are more than 700mg per serving. The FDA states that an individual food that has the claim “healthy” must not exceed 480mg per serving. The FDA has put together wording that manufacturers must adhere to:
  - “Less or Reduced Sodium” – 25 percent less sodium compared with the traditional food
  - “Light in Sodium” – 50 percent less sodium compared with the traditional food
  - “Low Sodium” – 140mg or less per serving
  - “Very Low Sodium” – 35mg or less sodium per serving
  - “Salt- or Sodium-Free” – less than 5mg sodium per serving

- **Opt for Low Sodium Products** – read your labels and select the reduced or lowered sodium products.

- **Limit Use of Sodium-Laden Condiments** – salad dressings, sauces, dips, ketchup, mustard, mayo, bouillon, relish, soy sauce all contain sodium.

- **Be Aware of Surprise Foods** – the salt content in some foods may surprise you including cereal, bread, and cottage cheese—be sure to check your labels.

(continued)
- **Use Herbs, Spices and Other Flavorings to Enhance Food** – learn to use fresh or dried herbs, spices, zest from citrus fruit, and fruit juices to jazz up your meals.

- **Use Salt Substitutes Wisely** – some salt substitutes or light salts contain a mixture of table salt and other compounds, and to achieve that salty taste, you may use too much and actually not use less sodium.

- **Eat Fewer Salty Snacks** – potato chips, corn chips, nuts, pickles, etc.

Remember, next time you are at the dinner table and want to say “Pass the salt please,” consider instead “No thank you, I’ll pass on the salt.” Cutting out added salt is an important piece of reducing your sodium intake, but it’s more important to eat more fresh foods and less processed foods. Always read your labels and be conscious of the sodium you are consuming. Salt is an acquired taste. By slowly reducing the amount you eat, you will lessen your desire for that salty taste and your taste buds will adjust. A diet rich in whole, unprocessed foods provides a healthy balance of fiber, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants—the more foods you consume in their natural forms the better. Plus, you will discover the fresh and vibrant flavors your food has to offer!

**About the Foundation** The Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation’s mission is to enhance the health and wellness of area residents, providing education, funding and programs that motivate people to adopt healthy lifestyles. Visit www.pottstownfoundation.org for more information about the Foundation, reliable and accurate health and wellness information, fun and fitness activities, a risk-assessment questionnaire, and much more.

**Commit to Mission Good Nutrition** In support of the Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation’s goal to promote healthy living and healthy lifestyles, the Foundation sponsors the *Mission Good Nutrition* program, which airs every Thursday at 7:00 p.m. on PCTV Channel 28. Tune in and discover nutritional ideas you can use immediately and benefit from every day. *Mission Good Nutrition* is an entertaining educational show designed to motivate, encourage and empower individuals to continue developing healthier dietary habits. Go to www.missiongoodnutrition.org for recipes featured on the program, a recipe message board, past and current episodes, fitness tips and quizzes.