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# Salt...

## The Heart of a Problem

by E. Scott Dawson, DO, FACC



**S**alt—sea salt, rock salt, sodium chloride—is a staple in every restaurant. Celebrity chefs carry a salt container with them. One of the first things learned in the kitchen is “salt, butter, and heavy cream.” Why? Because salt makes food taste better!

Salt has been noted since at least 2000 BC. Bacteria could not infect meat soaked in a salt solution and meat preserved with salt could be readily available for the winter. The many references to salt in the Bible include that of Lot’s wife turned into a pillar of salt after fleeing Sodom and Gomorrah.

Salt had a huge impact on developing countries and even was prominent in the Civil War. The North effectively cut off the South’s access to salt by taking Wilmington NC, a major salt-producing city. This gave rise to the infamous blockade-runners who supplied salt for preserving meat and fish. A famous movie, based in the South, featured a dapper blockade-runner who decried, “Frankly...I don’t give a damn.”

The problem with this great compound is that humans are not designed to eat and handle salt. In fact, we have an unbelievable ability to conserve salt at all costs. Generally, about 1,000 to 1,500 milligrams per day is all we need. Yet Americans eat close to 11,000 milligrams per day!

Our ancestors long ago ate primarily a vegetarian diet of fruits and nuts. The amount of sodium in plants is very low, which is why humans (and herbivores) have efficient salt-retaining mechanisms. When our diets started including meat, the amount of sodium intake increased. When the meat was cured, or preserved in brine, the salt intake skyrocketed.

Does excess salt contribute to high blood pressure? Yes. Especially if your body has a high affinity for retaining and conserving salt. The African-American population is a great illustrator of the power of evolution. African-Americans from rural Western Africa have some of the lowest rates of hypertension in the world. Compare that to African-Americans in the U.S. and the Caribbean, where some of the highest rates of hypertension exist. How is that possible?

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For several hundred years, the 16th to 19th century, slaves were forced to make an arduous journey across the ocean. Imagine seasickness, diarrhea, illness, heat, humidity, and lack of water. Those with the ability to retain salt (and water!) were able to survive. Their descendants exist today. Those who lacked the ability to retain salt, and hence water, perished.

Today a high salt diet is a big problem. Hypertension is one of the biggest drivers of cardiovascular disease. Atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries), aortic dissection, aortic aneurysm, and congestive heart failure are just a few of the downstream effects. Stroke is another. We live right smack in the middle of the Stroke Belt. Oh, and cardiovascular disease is the biggest killer and one of the biggest consumers of health care dollars.

What can we do? Stop using salt. Period. You can then quickly tell when someone has used salt in preparing

your meals. Quit adding salt to your food preparation. For example, adding salt to water in preparing pasta raises the boiling point, cooks say. True. Adding one to two tablespoons of salt to four or five quarts of water will raise the boiling point by only one to two degrees.

Read labels. Add the numbers. Use herbs and spices. Grow them yourselves. You will be shocked at the food industry. They do not care about you or your health; they care about the dollar numbers. Food companies don't care about your numbers...just theirs!

Reference: *Salt, Diet, and Health: Neptune's Poisoned Chalice: the Origins of High Blood Pressure.* MacGregor and De Wardener, 1998.

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