

Salt and blood pressure controversial and misunderstood

Evidence

Despite recent research, the relationship between salt and blood pressure remains controversial and not fully understood. There is no evidence that in healthy people salt causes high blood pressure.

Risks

Those who suggest that reducing salt intake has significant health benefits for the average healthy person do so without scientific proof to validate their theory. Indeed, some evidence suggests possible adverse effects from low sodium diets associated with undesirable changes in plasma renin, insulin, triglycerides and lipoprotein levels. For some sectors of the population such as the elderly, pregnant women and athletes, it may even be dangerous to switch to a low salt diet. Alarmist media reports and general recommendations to reduce salt intake have, therefore, the potential to cause harm.

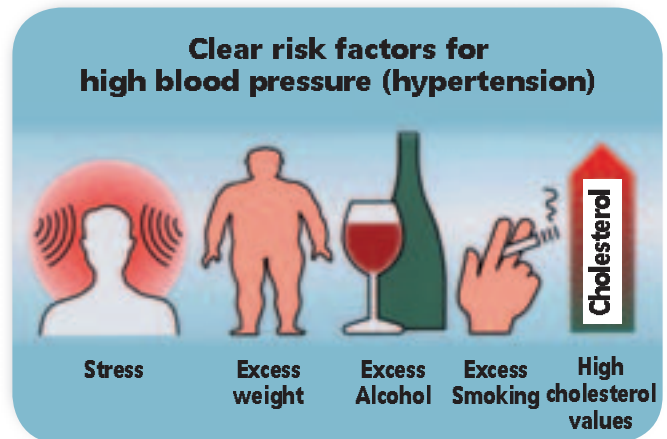
Benefits

Those people already clinically diagnosed as suffering from hypertension (high blood pressure) may benefit from reducing sodium intake as part of their overall treatment. However, other factors such as reducing stress, losing weight and alcohol restriction are likely to be more effective on the long term than reducing salt in the diet.

Science

Recent findings of respected scientists from around the world show that the healthy population in general does not benefit from reducing salt.

This was confirmed in 2004. The highly regarded Cochrane Library¹ published two meta-analyses of all major research done between 1966 and 2001



on the relationship between sodium intake and blood pressure. The conclusions of the review's authors were that:

- The present results indicate that the effect on the normotensive population² is small in spite of a considerable reduction in sodium intake. Furthermore extreme sodium reduction could lead to unfavourable increases in lipids.
- The magnitude of the effect in Caucasians³ with normal blood pressure does not warrant a general recommendation to reduce sodium intake.

Conclusion

Reducing salt intake has no significant health benefits for the average healthy people. For some sectors of the population it may even be dangerous to switch to a low salt diet.

(See our related Salt & Science Newsletter and other related position papers: Salt & water, Salt & the elderly, Salt & pregnancy, Salt & food)

References

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- 1 The Cochrane Library is an independent, non-profit organisation that produces and disseminates systematic reviews of healthcare interventions. It exists to provide high quality information to those receiving and giving medical care.
 - 2 Normotensive: those with normal blood pressure
 - 3 Caucasians: A generic term used for the white population. The Cochrane review use this term because some of the studies they reviewed focused on specific ethnic groups. Related to this they concluded, "The number of studies in Black and Asian patients was insufficient for different recommendations".