

## LIFESTYLES WITH SYLVIA



Dear Friends,

This month we're going to talk about salt. Why? Because whether you realize it or not you're most likely eating way too much of it... and that's not a good thing! On average, Americans consume one-and-a-half or more teaspoons of salt per day, and while that may not seem like a lot, the truth is that it's far more than we require to satisfy our body's need for sodium, the main element we get from salt.

So how much salt should we be consuming? Current U.S. recommendations call for a maximum of one teaspoon of salt, which equals 2,300 milligrams of sodium, per day, and even less (two-thirds of a teaspoon, or 1,500 milligrams of sodium) for those who suffer from high blood pressure or are at risk of developing it. The latter group includes people over the age of forty, African-Americans and those with somewhat elevated blood pressure levels, which is almost 70 percent of adults in the entire United States! Add in the fact that people with diabetes, kidney disease, history of heart failure and other medical conditions should be cutting back, too, you can see why one-and-a-half teaspoons of salt per day is such a serious problem!

The big challenge, then, is how to cut back, and the first step is to understand how we end up consuming so much salt in the first place. No, the main culprit isn't your own salt shaker—most of our salt comes from prepared foods like ready-made breads and crackers, canned and frozen foods, ready-to-eat breakfast cereals, cheese and restaurant foods. In other words, reducing our intake would require huge changes in food preparation, which would be both a big challenge for food producers and a change the salt industry wouldn't be too keen to make. After all, salt is a cheap additive that enhances flavor and livens up bland food. It also makes meat retain water, thus adding weight for which we pay top dollar. To top it all off, salt makes us thirsty, just another way the food industry nudges us to buy more soft drinks.

But I'm happy to report that change is on the way: in January, New York City launched a campaign against salt, urging food manufacturers and chain restaurants to voluntarily reduce sodium by 25 percent in their products nationwide over the next five years. New York City isn't alone, either: Baltimore, Boston, Los Angeles and Chicago are among a list of cities supporting the initiative. Who will be next? I say Southport, CT!

### **Sources of Salt: Where It Comes From and How It Adds Up**

Long, long ago, when humans roamed the Earth hunting and gathering, potassium was abundant and sodium scarce. The so-called Paleolithic diet provided upwards of 10,000 milligrams of potassium and under 700 milligrams of sodium per day. More potassium than sodium... now that IS a good thing!

Today, you could take in far more potassium than sodium by eating nothing but unprocessed foods you prepare yourself—fruits, vegetables, whole grains and nuts, plus a smattering of wild fish and naturally raised beef, chicken, eggs, and milk—and keeping a light hand on the salt shaker. At the same time you'd be getting plenty of vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients, healthy fats and other elements of a healthful diet. Unfortunately though, few of us eat this way, and our reliance on fast and prepared foods sadly tips the balance in the other direction.

Of course high salt use is by no means limited to fast food and chain restaurants. Chefs in fine restaurants and experts on cooking TV shows also use excessive amounts of salt in the meals they prepare for us or show us how to make. Why? Because their intent is to dazzle us with the flavors of their foods, and one of the easiest, most reliable (and laziest, if I do say so myself) ways to do so is to throw in lots of extra salt. It's not totally the chefs' fault, though: since we have already conditioned ourselves to high-salt taste experiences, chefs often find that they must raise the salt levels in their food to stand out.

### **Salt Basics: Why We Need It and What's Wrong with Too Much**

Sodium is much more than just a flavor; it also plays some very important roles in the proper functioning of the human body. The transmission of nerve impulses and the contraction of muscle fibers depend on sodium, and, along with potassium, sodium is essential for maintaining a proper fluid balance in and around cells. And while these tasks are obviously important, it actually takes very little sodium to accomplish them. As a result, when we consume too much sodium, our kidneys flush the excess out of our bloodstream via urine.

The problem is that, in most people, the kidneys have trouble keeping up with all of the excess sodium in the bloodstream, and as it begins to accumulate, the body responds by holding on to more water in order to dilute it. This increases both the amount of fluid surrounding our cells and the volume of blood in the bloodstream, which means more work for the heart and more pressure on the blood vessels. Over time, all of that extra work and pressure can stiffen blood vessels, potentially leading to high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke or heart failure. In fact, high blood pressure is a leading cause of cardiovascular disease, accounting for two-thirds of all strokes and half of all heart disease. Plus, there's also evidence that too much salt can damage the heart, aorta and kidneys without ever increasing blood pressure and that it may be bad for our bones, too.

### **Taking Action: How to Cut Back and Ways to Replace It**

So as you can see, too much salt is a silent killer, factoring into thousands of deaths each year. So how do you lower your intake? The answer is simple: start by reducing the amount of processed and prepared foods you eat and feed your family and choosing fresh foods instead. At the same time, use a variety of herbs to add tremendous flavor, freshness and zest to the foods you prepare yourself instead of going back to the salt shaker again and again. Not only will you cut your sodium intake, you'll also benefit from all of the powerful health benefits the scientific community continues to uncover in herbs; among the many of them packing a significant antioxidant punch these days are oregano, dill, garden thyme, rosemary and peppermint.

For more guidance on how to feed your family more healthfully and reduce the amount of salt in your diet, you can always return to that trusty little book by Michael Pollan, “Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual.” Here’s a quick reminder of some of my favorite of Pollan’s themes:

- Eat real food.
- If it came from a plant, eat it: if it was made in a plant, don’t.
- Cook.
- Never get your food from the same place as your car.
- Shop the peripheries of the supermarket and stay out of the middle.
- Avoid products that contain more than five ingredients.
- Sweeten and salt your food yourself.
- Limit your snacks to unprocessed plant foods.
- Avoid products containing ingredients that you wouldn’t keep in your pantry.
- Eat well-grown food from healthy soil.

Trust me, these simple rules are guaranteed to lower your sodium intake and get you on the road to a healthy lifestyle, one that allows you to take control of what you eat and how you feed your family.

#### **While I Have Your Ear...**

Please join me for a movie and luncheon date!

On Tuesday, May 11<sup>th</sup> at noon in Studio 1, I will be showing “Food Fight: Revolution Never Tasted So Good.” This film by Chris Taylor is 83 minutes of pleasure and information, and I highly recommend you take this opportunity to see it. In short, “Food Fight” is exactly what a documentary should be: educational... but mostly fun to watch.

Also, on Monday May 17<sup>th</sup> at 9:30 am in Studio 3, join me for a Master Yoga class. I’m so excited to teach in this time slot because it gives me the opportunity to introduce Brikram style yoga to a whole new community of potential and practicing yogis—all levels are welcome and encouraged to come!

Well that’s all for this month—feel free to contact me at [Sylviae9@aol.com](mailto:Sylviae9@aol.com) if you have any questions or feedback, and if this column excites you as much as last month’s column on flax-seeds, I know I will be hearing from you... which is always a pleasure!

Until next time, happy, healthful eating,

*Sylvia*

*May 2010*