

Lowering blood pressure through a reduction of salt in foods

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Salt is essential, but too much of a good thing can have detrimental effects on our health. The majority of the German population consume too much salt. Young men, children and adolescents in particular consume a diet rich in salt. High salt consumption can drive up blood pressure and thereby facilitate the development of heart diseases. In contrast, a diet low in salt can lower blood pressure. This effect is already manifest in children and can be supported by additional actions such as physical exercise, weight loss, a diet rich in potassium, and avoiding alcohol.

In some European countries, the salt content of processed foods has been reduced through systematic measures in recent years. Against this background, the Max Rubner Institute (MRI), the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) and the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) have reassessed the data on the salt intake of the German population. In addition, information on what kind of foods especially contribute to high salt intake and the effect of salt-reducing actions on hypertension has been analysed.

The BfR, MRI and RKI come to the conclusion that the average daily salt consumption of the German population of 9 grams for men and 6.5 grams for women is too high. The salt intake should be reduced to between 3.5 and a maximum of 6 grams per day. However, a diet low in salt is difficult to implement for consumers, because many processed foods contain salt. Among the foods which are principally responsible for the high salt intake are bread, meat, sausages, milk and cheese, although there are major differences within these types of foods. For example, hard cheese contains more salt than cream cheese.

A recommendation to eat lower quantities of the foods listed above is difficult to realise, since they constitute an inherent part of the diet in Germany. For this reason, the BfR recommends that the salt content in processed foods such as bread, sausage and cheese is reduced. Without the “salt in the soup”, many foods seem tasteless and insipid. By gradually reducing their salt intake, however, consumers can quickly get used to the less salty taste. In addition, awareness should be raised in the population about the connection between salt consumption and health.

The full version of this BfR Opinion is available in German on <http://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/343/blutdrucksenkung-durch-weniger-salz-in-lebensmitteln.pdf>