

WELL BALANCED

- FEBRUARY 2025 -

Heart Month



Cardiovascular disease refers to conditions affecting the heart and blood vessels. Among these conditions, heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the U.S. It can lead to heart attacks, strokes, heart failure, and peripheral artery disease. The risk of developing heart disease increases with other health factors such as poor diet, physical inactivity, excessive alcohol consumption, smoking, high-stress lifestyles, obesity, and diabetes.

The good news is that you can do a lot to improve your heart health and decrease your risk of developing heart disease and other illnesses. The Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP) recommends the following strategies:

- » Following a heart healthy diet
- » Getting and staying active
- » Maintaining a healthy weight
- » Quitting smoking and vaping
- » Controlling cholesterol, blood glucose, and blood pressure
- » Consuming alcohol in moderation
- » Managing stress
- » Getting enough sleep.

This list might feel overwhelming, but starting small is key to making lasting changes!

Remember:

Although the new year serves as the traditional time to set resolutions and goals, you can make positive change at any time throughout the year!



Did you know?

- » According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NIH), more than 40% of the sodium we eat comes primarily from ten food sources. Pizza, sandwiches, deli meats, soups, cheese, tacos and burritos, potato chips, fried chicken, scrambled eggs and omelets, breads and rolls.

One impactful way to improve heart health is by reducing sodium intake. Sodium is a mineral and a chemical element found in salt. While some sodium is essential for maintaining body fluids and supporting the proper function of muscles and nerves, excessive intake can be harmful. Lowering sodium has been shown to decrease blood pressure, which is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

People in the U.S. are the largest consumers of salt, and 90% of adults and children eat beyond the recommend daily amount. The recommended daily intake for sodium is less than 2,300 mg or about 1 teaspoon of table salt. However, most adults consume 3,400 mg. of sodium per day. If you want to improve your heart health by reducing your sodium intake, consider making some changes to how you shop for groceries, cook at home, and order meals when dining out.

» Grocery Shopping

Changing your habits at the grocery store may feel like a daunting task, but shopping for low or no sodium options does not have to be challenging. Here are some tips to help.

- » Choose fresh options whenever possible. Opt for more whole fruits and

Refer to this guide from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to better understand nutrition claims on food labels.

What It Says	What It Means
Salt/Sodium-Free	Less than 5 mg of sodium per serving
Very Low Sodium	35 mg of sodium or less per serving
Low Sodium	140 mg of sodium or less per serving
Reduced Sodium	At least 25% less sodium than the regular product
Light in Sodium or Lightly Salted	At least 50% less sodium than the regular product
No Salt Added or Unsalted	No salt is added during the processing—but these products may not be salt/sodium-free unless stated.

vegetables, skinless poultry, fish, and lean cuts of meat. Limit frozen meals, packaged snacks, and canned soups and broths as well as processed meats such as bacon, ham, and deli meats. In general, the freshest items are typically found in the outer aisles of the grocery store, while the most processed foods (anything in a bag, box, or package) are located in the inner aisles. Whenever possible, focus on shopping primarily in the outer aisles.

- » Read food labels to check the amount of sodium per serving and the number of servings per container. Take time to understand nutrition claims and what they mean (refer to the chart above). When purchasing canned or frozen foods, choose sodium free or low sodium options whenever possible, and be mindful of any added sauces or seasonings.
- » Talk to a nutrition expert. Many grocery stores employ registered dietitians and offer free consultations and other services. Consider exploring this option to learn more tips to individualize your grocery shopping experience.

» Cooking at Home

Cooking at home is a healthy alternative to dining out, as it allows you to control how your food is prepared. Here are some strategies to keep in mind when cooking at home.

- » Limit table salt and season your food with herbs, spices, and salt free seasonings instead.
- » If you are cooking with canned items like vegetables or beans, rinse them with water first. This will help eliminate some of the added salt.
- » Be mindful of condiments like ketchup, barbeque sauce, and salad dressing, as sodium found in these products can quickly add up. Consider making your own dressings or sauces, choosing low sodium alternatives, or substituting with garlic or citrus, for example.

» Dining Out

To support a balanced, heart-healthy diet, consider dining out as an occasional treat rather than a regular habit. When dining out, there are still ways to be mindful of your sodium intake.

- » Review the restaurant nutrition information ahead of time. Many restaurants provide nutrition information on their website, along with their menu. This will allow you to make an informed decision. Look for items that are grilled, baked, or steamed, and be mindful of creamy sauces and dressings.
- » It is ok to ask to customize your meal. You can request no salt added and dressings and sauces on the side to help better control your sodium intake.
- » Restaurant portions are often large enough for two or more meals. Consider sharing your meal with a friend or family member, or box half of your meal up right away to support mindful eating and reduce your sodium intake.

By making mindful choices when grocery shopping, cooking at home, and dining out, you can reduce your sodium intake and improve your heart health. Small, consistent changes can lead to lasting improvements, helping you reduce your risk for heart disease and other health concerns.

Resources

- » Tips for Reducing Sodium Intake (cdc.gov)
- » Sodium in Your Diet (fda.gov)
- » 5 Ways to Cut Down on Sodium and Improve Heart Health (nhlbi.nih.gov)
- » Keep your Heart Healthy (odphp.health.gov)

