Watch That Sodium, Parents!

By Barrie Lynne Sutton

Imagine that you’re packing your child a lunch to take on a picnic with some friends. Being a caring parent, you put some thought into packing nutritious foods. You decide to make your child a ham sandwich with some lettuce, tomato, and light mayonnaise, a single serving bag of pretzels, and a V8 vegetable juice. To the best of your knowledge, this sounds like a perfectly nutritious meal, right? Well unfortunately, it’s really not. More sodium is contained in that one meal than is recommended to be consumed for an entire day. Now you may be asking, why is sodium important? What effect does high sodium intake have on your child’s health? What are some foods that are lower in sodium and a better option for packed lunches?

An Introduction to Sodium

Sodium is a nutrient that is needed by the body for proper muscle and nerve function. It is also important for controlling your blood pressure and blood volume levels. Since sodium plays such a big role in the body it is necessary to have adequate sodium consumption however, almost all Americans consume more sodium than is necessary on a daily basis. Sodium is naturally found in most foods, including cheese, yogurt, celery, cabbage, and artichokes. The reason why people often consume too much is because additional sodium is added to foods during processing to extend their shelf life in the store. Sodium is also found high levels within ingredients, such as garlic salt, bouillon cubes, and baking soda that people use regularly for food preparation. Condiments, like mayonnaise, ketchup, and soy sauce, also contain sodium and are frequently used to flavor foods. Beverages such as canned vegetable juices, milk, and sports drinks can also contain high amounts of sodium. Knowing that sodium is naturally in most foods and additional sodium is added by processing and by the addition of condiments, isn’t it easy to see why people often mistakenly consume too much every day without realizing it?

Sneaky Sodium

Too much sodium in the diet on a regular basis has been proven to increase a person’s blood pressure. It is estimated that on average, children and adolescents 8-18 years old consume 3,387 mg per day of sodium (1). The recommended target amount of sodium is 1,500 mg per day and the highest amount that doesn’t seem to have long term effects on health is 2,300 mg per
day (2). The ham sandwich, pretzel snack, and vegetable juice picnic lunch mentioned before contains approximately 2,131 mg of sodium. This means that if you happen to cook up some wheat pasta with marinara sauce for dinner that same night, your child will have consumed over 2,431 mg of sodium, quite a high amount. It’s been proven by various studies and on-going research that children who regularly consume high amounts of sodium, greater than 2,300 mg of sodium daily, are at significantly higher risks of developing pre-high blood pressure, high blood pressure, and other heart and cardiovascular diseases (1). The risk of these diseases developing increases with regular high consumption of sodium or if your child is already overweight.

**Soaring Sodium Sources**

The best way to reduce your child’s sodium intake is to be aware of what types of foods contain high amounts of sodium and to deter them from eating these foods regularly. Processed foods tend to contain the highest amounts of sodium. Examples of processed foods that contain high amounts of sodium and that should not be eaten in large quantities regularly include deli meats, snack foods like potato chips, Lunchables, frozen pizzas, canned soups, and many other foods that are packaged in boxes or cans and have a long shelf life. Sodium intake throughout the day should also be monitored by looking at the nutrition facts labels located on food packages. It should also be kept in consideration that your child may have high sodium intake due to eating foods that contain moderate amounts of sodium frequently. Some examples of regularly eaten foods that aren’t particularly high in sodium but should be monitored are yeast breads, chicken and chicken mixed dishes, pizza, pasta dishes, and condiments (2). By being aware of the approximate amount of sodium being consumed by your child, you’ll be able to help them maintain a healthy diet and decrease their risk for future chronic diseases.

**Slowing Sodium Consumption**

Although almost all foods naturally contain sodium, there are many foods that have lower amounts and, even if eaten regularly, have little impact on your child’s overall sodium intake. Fresh vegetables tend to contain about 10 mg of sodium or less per serving. Examples of such vegetables include green, red, and yellow peppers, celery, spinach, broccoli, tomatoes, carrots, and mushrooms. Of course, this is if the vegetables are eaten raw or cooked without added salt.
It is important to be careful of how you prepare or cook these vegetables to be sure you’re not adding condiments or salts that will add sodium to them. Fresh fruits are also extremely low in sodium. Examples of fruits that can be eaten are bananas, strawberries, peaches, kiwi, apples, and blueberries. In addition to fruits and vegetables being low in sodium, they also tend to be high in other important nutrients that your child needs to maintain good health. Another way to avoid additional sodium is to look for foods that are offered in lower sodium versions or to try and prepare foods, such as canned soups, from scratch. When you prepare a meal from scratch using fresh ingredients there is typically less sodium because the foods weren’t processed and don’t contain preservatives.

**Sodium Quite Simply**

Sodium is found in almost all foods naturally. Foods that should not be consumed regularly due to higher sodium content are the processed foods that tend to make easy packed lunches that are quick for parents to put together for their children’s busy days. Some lower sodium food examples that make great additions to any packed lunch include bananas, baby carrots, strawberries, yellow, red, or green pepper slices, and oranges. Although monitoring sodium intake is important, it must also be understood sodium is also part of a healthy diet if it totals up to 2,300 mg per day or less. The lower amounts of sodium found naturally in fresh vegetables provide an adequate amount of sodium in your child’s diet even when eaten in larger amounts and make help make any meal more nutritionally beneficial. Helping your child monitor about how much sodium they consume in a day will decrease their risk for cardiovascular diseases and high blood pressure in the future.

**References:**


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