

# Lower salt, lower blood pressure

Consuming excessive salt, which the large majority of Malaysians are prone to doing, increases your risk of having elevated blood pressure.

By Dr TEE E SIONG

ARE you aware that you are probably overconsuming salt?

Did you know that according to both the World Health Organization (WHO) and Health Ministry, the recommended salt intake should be no more than five grammes or one teaspoon a day?

However, the Malaysian Community Salt Survey (MyCoSS) 2017-2018, which was a study on salt intake among Malaysians, showed a mean intake of 7.9g or 1.6 teaspoons of salt among the respondents.

It also found that about 79% of the Malaysian population – around four out of five Malaysians – consumed sodium excessively in their diet.

Most of the sodium we consume is from salt.

The excessive salt intake among Malaysians can be attributed to various unhealthy eating habits.

For example, when cooking, many of us tend to add all sorts of sauces, dressings or seasonings, which are actually high in salt.

This is even worse when we eat outside as we cannot control the amount of salt in our foods.

Many of the popular local dishes available in many eating places and through food delivery services are flavourful due to the high usage of salt and sauces.

In addition, some prepacked or canned foods can also be high in salt.

## Salt and hypertension

Did you know that three in 10 adults in Malaysia have hypertension (high blood pressure)?

This worrying statistic is higher than our neighbouring South-East Asian countries, and may be connected to our unhealthy salt intake.

Indeed, excessive sodium consumption has been shown to result in a significant increase in blood pressure, and linked with the onset of hypertension and related cardiovascular (heart) complications such as stroke and heart disease.

A high sodium intake causes fluid retention in our body.

This leads to an increase in blood volume and results in an elevated blood pressure due to the pressure exerted by the increased blood flow against the blood vessels.

As a general guide, normal blood pressure should be less than 120 millimetres mercury (systolic) and less than 80mmHg (diastolic).

If your blood pressure reaches 140mmHg or more (systolic) and 90 mmHg or more (diastolic), this means that you have hypertension.

Thus, the reverse is also true.

By reducing the amount of our salt intake, we can also reduce blood pressure levels, hence reducing the risk of hypertension and other health consequences.

It is also important to make other lifestyle changes, including being more physically active, losing weight for individuals who are overweight or obese, and eat-

ing more vegetables and fruits.

## Reducing salt intake

Here are some dietary interventions that can help reduce your salt intake:

### > Cook with less sodium/salt

Instead of using salt to flavour our dishes, try using a combination of herbs and spices in cooking.

For example, you can use black/white pepper, cinnamon, fennel, oregano or paprika.

Try reducing salt gradually before totally replacing it with herbs and spices.

### > Use umami seasonings to replace salt

Umami, which is a meaty, savoury and broth-like taste, is the fifth basic taste, alongside sweet, salty, sour and bitter.

The taste comes from glutamates, which is a substance naturally found in our bodies and protein-rich foods.

You can use umami seasonings such as monosodium glutamate (MSG), to enhance the umami taste and reduce salt in cooking.

For example, instead of using one teaspoon of salt, we can use half a teaspoon of salt and half a teaspoon of MSG.

With that, we can reduce our sodium intake by 34% while still maintaining the delicious taste of dishes.

### > Limit sauces, condiments and dressings

Most people are not aware that these food items are actually quite high in sodium.



Malaysians need to actively decrease their intake of salt as most of us take too much with our daily meals. – Positive Parenting

Instead of these salty snacks, choose fresh fruits or veggies as your snacks.

Many people are unaware that they have elevated blood pressure, or even hypertension.

As persons with hypertension do not have any symptoms, this condition is also known as a “silent killer”.

To make things worse, hypertension can lead to other illnesses such as heart disease, stroke and kidney failure, if left untreated.

Hence, it is important to do health screenings on a regular basis and to reduce your salt consumption.

These are part of a healthy lifestyle, which includes improving our overall dietary intake and being physically active.

By practising this lifestyle as a whole, you will be able to reduce the risk and prevalence of non-communicable diseases, including hypertension.

Dr Tee E Siong is chairman of the Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) steering committee and immediate past president of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM). This article is contributed by NMM 2024, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by NSM, the Malaysian Dietitians' Association and the Malaysian Society of Body Composition. NMM's annual Food-Fit-Fun Fair will be held in Pavilion Bukit Jalil, Kuala Lumpur, on May 22-26.

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