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Sea Salt vs Table Salt

Sea salt has some benefits – but probably won't do much to help you cut back on sodium.

Sea salt has boomed in popularity in restaurants and supermarket aisles. Many gourmet chefs say they prefer it over table salt for its coarse, crunchy texture and stronger flavor. Manufacturers are using it in potato chips and other snacks because it's "all natural," and less processed than table salt. And some health-conscious consumers choose it because it contains minerals like magnesium.

Each of the above-mentioned characteristics may set sea salt apart from table salt, but in one other very important respect there's usually no difference between the two: sodium content.

How does the amount of sodium in sea salt compare to table salt?

Most sea salts and table salt contain about 40 percent sodium by weight. Unfortunately, many consumers haven't gotten that message. In an April 2011 survey by the American Heart Association, 61 percent of respondents said they believed sea salt is a low-sodium alternative to table salt. Some varieties of sea salt may claim to have less sodium than table salt. You can check the Nutrition Facts label to compare how a given sea salt compares to table salt, which has about 575 mg sodium per ¼ teaspoon.

"It's very important for people to be aware that sea salt usually has as much sodium as table salt," said Rachel K. Johnson, Ph.D., R.D., an American Heart Association spokeswoman and the Bickford Professor of Nutrition at the University of Vermont.

"One of the keys to maintaining a heart-healthy diet is to control your sodium intake," she said. "If you're consuming more sea salt than you otherwise would because you think it has less sodium, then you may be placing yourself at higher risk of developing high blood pressure, which raises your risk of heart disease."

What's the difference between the way sea salt and table salt are made?

Sea salt is obtained directly through the evaporation of seawater. It is usually not processed, or undergoes minimal processing, and therefore retains trace levels of minerals like magnesium, potassium, calcium and other nutrients.

Table salt, on the other hand, is mined from salt deposits and then processed to give it a fine texture so it's easier to mix and use in recipes. Processing strips table salt of any minerals it may have contained, and additives are also usually added to prevent clumping or caking.

While these attributes may make sea salt more attractive from a marketing standpoint, Johnson says there are no real health advantages of most sea salts.

“The minute amounts of trace minerals found in sea salt are easily obtained from other healthy foods,” Johnson said. “Sea salt also generally contains less iodine than table salt. Iodine has been added to table salt since the 1920s to prevent the iodine-deficiency disease goiter.”

The next time you find yourself choosing between sea salt and table salt, remember that it’s probably mostly a matter of letting your taste buds decide. But whichever option you choose, keep in mind that both usually contain the same amount of sodium.

For more information on sodium and your heart health, visit www.heart.org/sodium

