

# SODIUM:

## *what you need to know*

TOO MUCH OF THIS COMMON FOOD INGREDIENT  
CAN CAUSE HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE



WE HEAR A LOT ABOUT THE DANGERS OF too much fat or sugar, but we sometimes neglect the hazards of excessive salt, or sodium. To explain the role of sodium in the diet—and the importance of limiting sodium for some people—*Central Carolina Health and Life* spoke recently with board-certified cardiologist Lukas Jantac, M.D., of Central Carolina Hospital:

**CCH&L:** How much sodium should we consume daily?

**DR. JANTAC:** Sodium is a necessary mineral to build muscles and nerves and to absorb nutrients. However, too much sodium can contribute to high blood pressure, or hypertension. If you're on a regular diet, the American Heart Association recommends that you limit your sodium intake to less than 2,300 mg per day (the equivalent of 1 teaspoon of salt). For those who need to restrict their sodium intake, the AHA recommends less than 1,500 mg per day (slightly more than ½ tsp of salt). You



Lukas Jantac, M.D.

should not exceed 600 mg of sodium per meal.

**CCH&L:** How does sodium affect blood pressure?

**DR. JANTAC:** When you ingest sodium, it is absorbed into the bloodstream through the digestive system. Increased sodium intake increases the blood volume and requires the heart to pump blood harder to all the tissues in the body. Sodium also reduces the amount of blood that goes back into the heart by restricting the blood vessels, or arterioles. Arterioles regulate blood pressure and flow by

dilating and constricting, but excessive sodium is believed to decrease blood movement and add pressure to vessel walls, thus increasing the blood pressure. Research suggests that people's sensitivity to sodium varies by age, genetics, weight and resting heart rate.

**CCH&L:** What is considered a "normal" blood pressure?

**DR. JANTAC:** Normal is 120/80 milligrams per deciliter. Readings between 120/80 and 139/89 are labeled pre-hypertension, while those of 140/90 or above are deemed high blood pressure. People with blood-pressure readings of 150/100 or above should be seen by a physician.

**CCH&L:** What is considered low-sodium?

**DR. JANTAC:** Many foods naturally contain sodium—for example, meats, nuts, grains, fruits, vegetables and dairy products. But prepared and processed foods have added sodium as a preservative. If you look at labels, you will see many different terms describing the sodium content in prepared foods: sodium-free, low-sodium, reduced sodium or "unsalted." Here are a few definitions:

- **Sodium-free or salt-free:** less than 5 mg sodium per serving
- **Very low sodium:** 35 mg or less per serving
- **Low sodium:** 140 mg or less per serving

Foods labeled as reduced sodium or "unsalted" may very well surpass 140 mg, so you should read the labels carefully before adding them to your meal plan. Remember too that some over-the-counter medications and prescription drugs contain sodium, so if you are limiting your sodium intake, check the labels or ask your pharmacist.