

Lifewire: Snack season is upon us so don't forsake your blood pressure

by Ven_Griva

It's the holiday season, the time of year when the flow of snacks seems to never end. It's also a good time to think about keeping the wraps on the amount of salty snacks we gobble during this festive time of year.

The folks at the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute want to remind us that there are many important steps we can take to maintain a healthy blood pressure. These steps include regular physical activity, maintaining a healthy body weight, and choosing and preparing foods with less salt and sodium.

The overconsumption of salt can be directly linked to high blood pressure, say the experts at the institute. Countless medical studies have linked high blood pressure, or hypertension, to a score of life-threatening ills such as cardiovascular disease, heart attack, stroke and kidney failure.

It is a sad-but-true fact that most Americans consume more salt than they need, say the experts at the institute. And most of the salt in the American diet comes from processed foods and snacks.

Currently, the NHLBI recommends that Americans should consume no more than 2,400 milligrams of sodium per day, which is roughly equal to the amount of sodium found in 1 teaspoon of table salt.

In fact, it is common for doctors to advise patients with high blood pressure to consume even less. Recent research has shown that a daily diet limiting salt to about 1,500 mg per day provides even better blood pressure-lowering benefits. Studies show that such lower-sodium diets can even help blood pressure medicines perform better.

LOW-SALT TIPS

The following are recommendations from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute to help you limit the salt in your diet:

- Remove the saltshaker from the table.
- Use herbs, spices and salt-free seasoning blends in cooking and at the table.

- When available, buy low- or reduced-sodium, or no-salt-added versions of foods.
- Buy fresh, plain frozen or canned "with no salt added" vegetables.
- Use fresh poultry, fish and lean meat, rather than canned or processed types.
- Limit smoked or cured salami, beef, pork or poultry
- Rinse canned foods, such as tuna, to remove some sodium.
- Use fewer sauces, packaged mixes and instant products, including flavored rices, pasta and cereal, which usually have salt added.
- Cook rice, pasta and hot cereals without salt.
- Choose "convenience" foods that are lower in sodium.
- Avoid frozen dinners, pizza, canned soups or broths, and salad dressings because they often contain excessive amounts of sodium.

GOOD NIGHT

A recent large British study into the relationship between sleep and health has reinforced the recommendation that the healthiest adults get a consistent seven to eight hours of sleep per night.

Jane E. Ferrie of the University College London Medical School focused on more than 10,000 participants between 35 and 55 years of age. Published Dec. 1 in the journal SLEEP, it is the first to show that both a decrease and an increase in sleep duration are linked with an elevated risk of death by cardiovascular and non-cardiovascular means, respectively.

Study participants were given a clinical examination and a self-administered questionnaire between 1985 and 1988 (Phase 1 of the study) and again in 1992 and 1993 (Phase 3).

Participants who reported six, seven or eight hours of sleep when the study started, displayed an elevated risk of dying of heart disease if over time they reduced their sleep to fewer than six hours per night.

Interestingly, if the study participants increased their sleep to more than seven or eight hours per night from their initial six or seven, they showed an increase in mortality from non-cardiovascular causes.

These findings remained relatively constant even after adjusting for socioeconomic factors and health-related behaviors, such as alcohol, caffeine and tobacco use.

"In terms of prevention, our findings indicate that consistently sleeping seven or eight hours per night is optimal for health," said Dr. Ferrie. "The indication that mortality rates are lower in participants who slept five to six hours or less at Phase 1, but who reported extended hours of sleep at Phase 3, implies that increasing sleep duration in short sleepers is likely to have health benefits.

"In contrast to this, the finding that an increased duration of sleep among those sleeping seven to eight hours is associated with higher levels of mortality implies that sleep restriction should at least be considered."

On average, most adults need seven to eight hours of sleep each night to feel alert and well-rested, sleep experts say.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine offers the following tips on how to get a good night's sleep:

- Follow a consistent bedtime routine.

- Establish a relaxing setting at bedtime.

- Get a full night's sleep every night.

- Avoid foods or drinks that contain caffeine, as well as any medicine that has a stimulant, before bedtime.

- Do not go to bed hungry, but don't eat a big meal before bedtime either.

- Avoid any rigorous exercise within six hours of your bedtime.

- Make your bedroom quiet, dark and a little bit cool.

- Get up at the same time every morning.

- Those who believe they have a sleep disorder should consult with their primary care physician or a sleep specialist.

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