

Sodium is a mineral needed to maintain body fluids and proper nerve function. It occurs naturally (though in small amounts) in many foods, but most of the sodium in our diets comes from seasonings and ingredients added to foods, especially processed foods. Although sodium is essential, most Americans consume more than they need. The American Heart Association recommends limiting sodium to no more than 2400 milligrams a day; however did you know that a single teaspoon of table salt, or sodium chloride, contains approximately 2400 milligrams of sodium?

Research has shown that following a healthy eating plan that is low in sodium and rich in certain nutrients can both reduce the risk of developing high blood pressure and lower an already elevated blood pressure. One eating plan proven in clinical trials to lower blood pressure is called the DASH eating plan. "DASH" stands for "Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension". This plan emphasizes fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products and includes whole grains, poultry, fish and nuts. Not getting enough of the nutrients found in these foods (like potassium, calcium and magnesium) and consuming excessive amounts of sodium may contribute to high blood pressure. The DASH plan is also low in saturated fat and has reduced amounts of red meats, sweets and sugared beverages. The DASH plan is similar to other healthy eating plans recommended to prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer and obesity.

By getting plenty of potassium, calcium and magnesium, and limiting your sodium intake, you can achieve improved blood pressure readings. As is usually the case, the best results occur when combining real foods, not supplements. Cutting back on your sodium intake requires limiting your intake of processed foods like canned goods (soups, vegetables), salty snacks (chips), deli and processed meat products, frozen entrees (exceeding 600 mg of sodium) and fast foods.

To help you get more potassium, calcium and magnesium and less sodium in your diet try the DASH diet meal plan.

Food Group	Example of Serving	Number of servings for 1600-2000 Calorie Diet
Grains & grain products <b>provide potassium and magnesium</b> (at least ½ of grains should be whole)	1 slice whole wheat toast ½ cup cooked brown rice 1 oz dry whole grain cereal	6 to 8
Fruits <b>provide potassium</b>	1 medium fruit (banana) ¼ cup dried fruit	4 to 5
Vegetables- <b>provide potassium;</b> green leafy ones <b>provide magnesium</b>	1 cup raw spinach ½ cup cooked carrots	4 to 5
Non-fat and Low-fat dairy products <b>provide calcium</b>	8 oz low-fat milk or yogurt 1½ oz low-fat cheese	2 to 3
Nuts, seeds and legumes <b>provide potassium and magnesium</b>	⅓ cup nuts or 2 tbsp seeds ½ cup dried beans or peas ( <i>cooked</i> )	3 to 5 per week
Lean meats, fish, poultry	1 egg = 1oz 2 oz cooked fish	1½ to 2
Fats	1 tsp olive oil 1 tbsp light mayo	2 to 3
Sweets	1 tbsp sugar, jam or jelly ½ cup sorbet	0 to 5 per week

References: The Dash Eating Plan. <http://www.dashdiet.org/>  
American Heart Association. Sodium (Salt or Sodium Chloride).  
<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4708>