

Salt Intake and High Blood Pressure Not Related?

*This article originally posted 12 May, 2011 and appeared in [Diet, Complications and Comorbidities, Issue 573](#)
[Diabetes in control](#)*

Researchers found that people with low salt intakes were more likely to die of heart disease than people with higher salt intakes. But Harvard nutrition experts say the study is inaccurate and misleading....

The study surveyed 3,681 people living in various European countries over an eight year period. At the end of that eight year period, 56% of participants with low sodium intakes were more likely to have died from cardiovascular illness than those with high salt intakes.

The study refutes what has become a gospel truth in the US prompting government health experts to insist Americans decrease their salt intake in the quest to reduce hypertension and cardiovascular disease risks.

The European study found that of the 3,681 people followed over the years, 2,100 of those participants with normal blood pressure at the start of the study, their salt intake had no effect on the development of high blood pressure. The study, on the outset, appears to contradict the US government health and diet recommendation that Americans reduce their salt intake to prevent cardiovascular disease.

Harvard nutritionists say the study should be ignored because it contradicts 25 years of research that correlates high salt intake, high blood pressure and the risk of cardiovascular disease.

American researchers feel the study of close to 4,000 people in Italy, Bulgaria, Belgium, Russia and Romania is misleading, far from thorough or accurate and therefore invalid. The European study surveyed the excretion of sodium once at the end of an eight year survey. Harvard says that one sodium excretion sample isn't a fair survey of a person's salt intake over an eight year period even if the measurement of a person's sodium excretion is considered an accurate measure of the person's sodium intake. The oldest ages of the participants in the study were 49 at the end of the eight year period which Harvard scientists believe is too young to form conclusions or make comparisons with hypertension sufferers in the U.S.

Seventy-five percent of Americans' sodium intake comes from processed foods and in response to the high percentage, the Institute of Medicine has called on the US Food and Drug Administration to regulate the amount of salt and sodium allowed in processed foods. WASH (World Action on Salt Health) states that evidence connecting high blood pressure to high salt intake is as strong as the evidence that links lung cancer to cigarette smoking. There have been a number of studies: genetic, epidemiological, mortality, population, migration, intervention, and treatment conducted to prove the link between high salt intake and hypertension.

Studies and statistics suggest that 90 percent of Americans will develop high blood pressure in their lives. Population studies conducted in Japan in the 1950s found that high salt consumption and deaths from stroke were among the highest in the world, particularly in north Japan. The Japanese government initiated a successful health campaign to reduce salt intake which helped decrease the levels of high blood pressure in children as well as bring about an 80 percent reduction in stroke mortality. At the same time, there was a huge reduction of cigarette smoking, excessive weight gain, and alcohol consumption.

Similar studies were conducted in North Karelia, Finland which also resulted in a healthier and longer lived population.

Harvard Health writers suggest that those who want to ward off the possibility of hypertension stick to diet, exercise and make the commitment to lose weight. Those are the guaranteed three heart health tips for prevention of cardiovascular disease risk and hypertension. Harvard researchers did not point to European diets or prepared raw foods versus processed foods in measurements or comparisons of US diets and European diets.

Certainly, if the European study was conducted to prove that European food and preparation is healthier than American, Harvard would likely argue the point is well taken, but moot in a society long fueled by fast food, quick fixes and microwaved meals. Furthermore, US efforts championing healthier diet, food and beverage choices and requirements are often met with fierce resistance and resented. Many feel the call to regulate American diets or encourage healthy eating is government intrusion on personal privacy and a lapse in personal freedoms.

Yet, advocacy groups for minority health have often pointed to the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables, versus the abundance of available processed foods in urban areas and grocery stores where large pockets of African Americans live, many of whom are affected by hypertension, excessive weight, diabetes and heart disease.

Practice Pearls:

- ◆ Explain that a study of 24-hour urinary sodium excretion found an association between lower excretion and increase in cardiovascular deaths.
- ◆ Point out, however, that diagnosis of hypertension did not correlate with lower sodium excretion even though systolic blood pressure was higher.

Stolarz-Skrzypek K, et al "Fatal and nonfatal outcomes, incidence of hypertension, and blood pressure changes in relation to urinary sodium excretion" JAMA 2011; 305(17): 1777-1785.