



Nutrition and Aging Resource Center

Managing Sodium in Meals and Menus

High sodium intake can raise blood pressure, and high blood pressure (hypertension) is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke. According to the 2015 Older Americans Act (OAA) Title III-C Nutrition Service Program Evaluation, the top sodium sources in Title III-C meals are:

- Sandwiches
- Mixed dishes with meat, poultry, and seafood
- Soups
- Cured meats and poultry
- Sweet bakery products
- Mashed potatoes

Additionally, the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) identified sandwiches; rice, pasta, and grain-based mixed dishes; and non-starchy vegetables as the top three sources of sodium in the American diet, respectively. Knowing these top sources allows local service providers to focus their efforts on providing appealing meals that comply with state unit on aging requirements to meet the Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) for sodium. More support is coming from the Food and Drug Administration's Voluntary Sodium Reduction Goals, which encourage industry to reduce sodium levels in multiple food categories across the food supply by 2024.

Tips to Reduce Sodium

Purchasing Food

- Include criteria for reduced sodium content (i.e., reduced sodium, low sodium, salt/sodium free) in food specifications.
- Prepare written agreements for food or meal vendors that support sodium reduction efforts in prepared foods and the use of low-sodium and no-sodium seasonings in preparation.
- Read the Nutrition Facts label to identify and compare sodium content of products.

- Apply the 5/20 Guide to the Daily Values (DV) on the Nutrition Facts label to help identify higher and lower sodium foods (5% DV per serving is considered low; 20% DV is considered high).

Menu Planning and Meal Production

- Limit high-sodium processed meats (ham, sausage, hotdogs, and luncheon or deli meats) to no more than twice per week.
- Balance higher sodium entrees and foods across the menu cycle (e.g., if processed meats are served twice in a week, avoid serving as a sandwich, and avoid mixed dishes in that week).
- Pair high-sodium foods with lower-sodium foods (e.g., macaroni and cheese with a low-sodium entrée and frozen/fresh vegetable instead of canned).
- Use different cooking processes such as baking, roasting, broiling, etc.
- Have chefs and cooks taste-test dishes periodically and update standardized recipes as changes in saltiness are noticed. Take advantage of this to incorporate lower sodium seasonings.
- Include condiments that are low in sodium, such as lemon juice, instead of higher sodium options like tartar sauce.
- Drain extra sauce when serving.

Table 1: Reducing the Sodium Content in Meals

Instead of:	Try:
Flavoring foods with salt, high sodium seasonings, soy sauce	Onions, garlic, fresh or dried herbs, spices, vinegars, citrus juices, diluted soy sauce
High sodium soup bases and canned foods	Low sodium, reduced sodium* or no salt added soup bases and canned goods
High sodium canned foods (vegetables, legumes)	Drain and rinse canned foods like vegetables and legumes with water
Canned vegetables with salt, frozen vegetables with sauce	Fresh, canned without salt, or frozen vegetables without sauce
Processed meats, poultry, and seafood (deli meat, sausage, pepperoni, sardines)	Fresh meat, poultry, and seafood
Instant products like flavored rice and ready-made pasta	Regular rice and pasta with low sodium seasonings and sauces
High sodium condiments like ketchup, mustard, pickles, olives, salad dressings	Low or reduced sodium* condiments and salad dressings
Purchasing products without comparing nutrition labels	Reading the Nutrition Facts labels to compare products and choose lower sodium foods

* Foods labeled “reduced sodium” may still be high in sodium. Read the Nutrition Facts label to determine sodium content.

The above table is adapted from “[Older Californians Nutrition Program Menu Guidance](#),” Figure 2.

Sodium Reduction Example

Soy Braised Pork Rib Entrée

A summary of changes in ingredients and preparation to reduce sodium in a standardized recipe:

- Replace regular soy sauce with low-sodium soy sauce.
- Replace the baking soda in the marinade with ginger ale.
- Use sauce as the marinade.
- Bake the marinated pork ribs in the oven.
- Drain extra sauce when portioning during meal service.

Source: Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age Center (MA)

Example menus with sodium information can be found on [Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age Center’s website](#).

Ideas for Sodium Labeling on the Menu

- Identify appropriate icons for your program to use in labeling high- and low-sodium foods or meals. A salt shaker and heart icons are often used.
- For choice menus, include sodium content on the menu.
- Label each meal with sodium content in milligrams.
- Include state sodium requirements and/or recommended sodium intake information on the menu.

Menu Labeling of Sodium in Local Programs

- [Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age Center \(MA\)](#): Provides meals to older adults in the Greater Boston area. Menus are labeled with sodium content for each meal.
- [Mystic Valley Elder Services \(MA\)](#): Menus are labeled with sodium and calorie contents.
- [Serving Seniors \(CA\)](#): Menu options that have >1,000 mg in sodium content are labeled with a salt-shaker icon.
- [El Dorado County \(CA\)](#): Menus are labeled with salt and pepper shakers to indicate meals with >1,000 mg sodium.

References/Resources

[Key Food Sources of Sodium, Saturated Fat, Empty Calories, and Refined Grains in the Diets of Program Participants](#): ACL issue brief.

[Tips for Reducing Sodium without Reducing Flavor](#): NRCNA practice brief.

[Sodium Reduction in Foodservice: A Resource for Public Health Professionals Partnering with Food Service Providers](#): CDC tip sheets for non-foodservice professionals to use in working with foodservice providers.

[Delicious Heart Healthy Eating](#): NIH webpage with multicultural heart-healthy recipes and other resources that follow the DASH diet guidelines.

[Mastering Healthy and Flavorful Cooking](#): Department of Defense fact sheet on various cooking methods; how to retain nutrients; and practices to lower salt, fat, and caloric content.

[Tips to Reduce Salt and Sodium](#): NIH fact sheet on ways to lower sodium intake and examples of common high-sodium foods.