

Many US shoppers choose low-salt fare

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Survey found about a third opt for healthier grocery items, although experts say labels could be improved.

(HealthDay)—About a third of Americans say they specifically buy foods labeled "low" or "reduced salt or sodium" when they're grocery shopping, a new study finds.

The results are encouraging, nutrition experts say, because too much [salt](#) in the diet can raise heart risks. However, more must be done to educate consumers on smart shopping and eating when it comes to salt.

"Despite what you might think, use of the salt shaker is not the main cause of excess [sodium](#) in the diet—in fact, the majority of sodium consumed from the US diet comes from packaged and restaurant foods," said Danielle Staub, an outpatient clinical dietitian at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City.

"This tells us that we need to be savvy consumers when purchasing food away from the home," she said.

Another expert agreed.

Consumers "need to understand that they should be trying to keep their intake to roughly 2,000 milligrams [about a teaspoon] daily, and they need to then interpret label information based on number of servings per container, number of servings consumed, etcetera," said Rebecca Blake, director of clinical nutrition at Mount Sinai Beth Israel Hospital in New York City.

"This can definitely be a daunting process for the average grocery shopper," said Blake, who was not involved in the new research.

The study was led by Jessica Lee Levings, who's with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention. Her team looked at data from a survey of more than 3,700 adults conducted in 2010.

The study found that more than half of shoppers said they knew how to use the information on food nutrition labels to keep track of salt intake, and that nearly half checked the labels for [sodium content](#) to lower the salt in their diet.

About one-third of shoppers said they specifically bought foods labeled low or reduced salt or sodium, the study found.

However, just under one-fifth of shoppers said they were confused trying to figure out how much salt is in the foods they eat, according to the report, published April 9 in the CDC journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*.

"Food manufacturers can meet this demand [for low sodium foods] by producing food items that are lower in sodium and including this information on the front of their packages," Levings' team wrote.

Educating consumers will help, too. When it comes to lowering the amount of salt in people's diet, "we have more work to do in providing education to school-aged children and teens, older adults, and in minority populations," said Jill Ashbey-Pejoves, lead clinical dietitian at Northern Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco, N.Y.

She believes that "increased availability of lower sodium foods would be a huge step in the right direction."

But Blake said food labeling must be clearer, too, and she offered up tips for consumers.

"It is always a good idea for [food manufacturers](#) to provide easy-to-understand labeling," she said. "Consumers must always keep in mind that just because a food is labeled "lower sodium" or "25 percent less sodium"—this does not make it a low-sodium food."

Blake noted that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has published guidelines for industry that define how salt-oriented terms can be used. These include:

- salt/sodium-free: less than 5 milligrams [mg] of sodium per serving,
- very low sodium: 35 mg of sodium or less per serving,
- low sodium: 140 mg of sodium or less per serving,
- reduced sodium: at least 25 percent less sodium than in the original product (keeping in mind the original product may be extremely high in sodium, as in soy sauce and many soups),
- light in sodium or lightly salted: At least 50 percent less sodium

than the regular product (again, keeping in mind this may still leave you with a "high sodium" product, depending on the content of the regular product),

- no-salt-added or unsalted: no salt is added during processing, but not necessarily sodium-free.

"The bottom line is that consumers need a context for these numbers," Blake said.

More information: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration explains how to [lower salt in your diet](#).

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