

5 Tips for Creating Flavorful Low-Sodium Meals

by Michael Franco



Set aside the shaker! Using onions and herbs in your scrambled eggs gives you a delicious dish without loads of sodium.

We know, we know. Low-sodium cooking sounds about as exciting as flossing or getting an annual physical. But, we're sorry to say, just like those other things, it's important. That's because while some sodium is necessary to regulate your bodily fluids, too much of it can cause water to build up in your [blood](#), leading to an increase of blood volume -- a surefire way to increase your blood pressure.

Think of it another way: [Salt](#) is actually a cheater's way out. Whether you're making a gourmet feast or just whipping up some scrambled eggs, it's easy -- and usually quite satisfying to your taste testers -- to just sprinkle on some salt and let it carry the bulk of the flavor load for your dish.

True creativity in the kitchen, though, requires you to step away from the shaker and turn instead to other ingredients that can add more complex and interesting flavor to your dishes. Not only will things actually taste better -- really, they will! -- but your body will also be better for it.

Cutting back on sodium? Even if you've stopped sprinkling [salt](#) on your [foods](#), you could still be on sodium overload. According to the Center for Science in the Public Interest, 77 percent of your daily sodium comes from the processed and prepared foods you eat -- long before you ever add a dash of salt.

While you may expect to find sodium in the obvious places -- salt-covered [pretzels](#), for example -- it also lurks in thousands of other ready-to-eat foods, from pudding and cereal to bread and canned vegetables. And, because sodium occurs naturally in a variety of foods, you're not in danger of getting too little.

Why does that matter? For starters, you can't live without sodium. It helps maintain fluid levels within blood cells that transmit information to muscles and nerves. It also helps your small intestine absorb nutrients. However, too much sodium in your diet can lead to high blood pressure, which can play a part in heart disease, kidney disease or strokes.

So, even though you need sodium, you're on the right track if you've put down the saltshaker. Just one teaspoon of salt contains a whopping 2,325 milligrams of sodium, which is more than your 2,300-milligram daily limit -- and most Americans consume two or three teaspoons of salt every day.

If you're really determined to watch your sodium intake, try fixing these foods for dinner. Not only are they nearly sodium-free, they're tasty, too.

Here, we offer five smart, easy and effective ways to slash the salt while turning up the taste.

1 Choose Rice Pudding, not Chocolate Pudding



Creamy rice pudding has much less sodium than chocolate pudding.

Dessert may be your favorite part of dinner, but if you're not careful it could really increase your sodium intake. This means that if you're watching your sodium, sweet fare filled with baking soda, [baking powder](#), buttermilk and salt are probably off limits. Unfortunately, that's nearly every boxed mix that results in a cake, cookie, pudding or sweet bread.

Of course, this doesn't mean you have to skip dessert. Creamy rice pudding can be served cold or hot, and is quite tasty. It uses a simple mix of ingredients -- rice, milk, nutmeg, vanilla extract and [sugar](#) -- and is much lower in sodium than pre-packaged pudding mixes.

Plus, you could always go the extra mile to make a dessert you really crave. Just alter a few ingredients and omit the salt altogether. Start by asking your local compounding pharmacist to whip up a batch of sodium-free baking powder. It sounds like a wacky request, but it's common practice for people on low-sodium diets. The concoction of tartaric acid, potassium bitartrate, bicarbonate and cornstarch bypasses the sodium in baking powder but still has the same effect in baked goods.

While few foods are truly sodium free, many contain negligible amounts of the element. Knowing which ones can make your dinner plate a lot safer.

2 Choose Homemade Soup, Not Canned

The next time the soup's on, the sodium may be, too.

The average cup of canned soup serves up 1,000 milligrams of sodium. Even the best pre-prepared soup options reach an average of 300 milligrams of sodium for every bowl. And that doesn't include any toppings, like shredded [cheese](#) or saltine crackers.

Your best bet? Go organic. Often, the manufacturers of organic soups keep the sodium count low. Health Valley Organic's No Salt Added Organic Lentil Soup, for example, has just 30 milligrams sodium per cup. That's hard to beat -- even if you're making a low-sodium soup in your own kitchen. But it can be done. Truth is, it's not difficult to stir up a soup that uses no sodium at all (except the minimal amount that occurs naturally in a few of its ingredients).

For a delectable vegetable beef soup, simmer beef short ribs in water with bay leaves and thyme. Be sure to buy fresh herbs or whole dried herbs because blended seasoning mixes usually contain lots of salt. Top the brew with freshly chopped carrots, celery, potatoes and [tomato](#). In about an hour, you can remove the bones, and sup away -- as close to sodium-free as you'll get with a soup.

3 Choose Salmon, not Shellfish



If you're watching your sodium intake, choose fresh fish like salmon, over shellfish.

[Seafood](#) makes a tasty meal, and most of the time it doesn't pose a health threat (unless you have a penchant for rolling the culinary dice with poisonous fugu fish, that is). Before you tie on a bib and dine your way through the Admiral's Feast at one popular restaurant chain, however, keep this in mind: This entree of fried clams, shrimp and fish will send 4,400 milligrams of sodium coursing through your veins.

For a nearly no-sodium version, opt for broiled, poached or grilled fish. A serving of baked salmon has just 55 milligrams of sodium, and most other fish follows suit. Just make sure your catch of the day isn't smoked, or covered with a glaze or sauce, because this piles on the sodium.

Shellfish is higher in sodium than fish, often ranging up to 500 milligrams per serving. And that's if it's fresh and processed without [salt](#). If you're buying crab legs, for instance, these delectable morsels often are frozen in salty brine as a preserving agent, and this can cause the sodium content to reach astronomical proportions. Fresh, not frozen, is better. Or, watch for labels that spell out how the shellfish has been processed.

If you're watching your sodium intake, make sure you're eating the real thing: Imitation crab legs have large quantities of sodium added during processing. The same is true for nearly any type of highly processed fish, like canned tuna.

Even the most dedicated label-reader may run aground when it comes to seafood, though. Which creatures of the sea need a sodium warning label.

4 Choose Chicken, not Ham

How's this for sodium sticker-shock? Deli ham (and we're not talking the whole package here, just what you'd put between two slices of [bread](#)) contains more than 500 milligrams sodium. A slice of oven-roasted, [fat-free](#) chicken breast will add more than 600 milligrams sodium to your meal.

In general, though, chicken is a safer low-sodium bet than ham. Ounce for ounce, ham is much saltier. It's the preparation that gives salt-cured ham more than twice the sodium of its once-feathered counterpart.

Even if you reach for poultry products in the grocery aisle, you still need to be vigilant. Four ounces of fresh chicken or turkey has just 50 milligrams sodium, compared to the triple-digit sodium in a seasoned turkey roast

you may pluck out of the freezer case: Just one serving yields a whopping 760 milligrams. You can get the same entrée, in a low-sodium version, by buying unseasoned fresh turkey and adding no-sodium seasonings and herbs while roasting.

And, buying fresh poultry that isn't shaped into sandwich-sized slices doesn't mean you'll avoid sodium. Watch the labels. Some raw poultry has been injected with saltwater; these additives can contribute as few as 119 milligrams to more than 400 milligrams of sodium per serving.



5 Choose Broccoli, not Celery

A serving of broccoli has only 10 mg of sodium.

Veggies are a mainstay of any healthy dinner, but if you're watching your sodium it pays to opt for fresh or frozen vegetables -- even if you plan to cook them before you dine. That's because whether you steam or sauté your fresh produce, you can control the introduction of salt or other sodium-rich seasonings -- which is exactly why you should steer clear of canned vegetables.

Preservatives, seasonings and salt are liberally added to the kind of produce you'll find in a tin, and cause the sodium content to skyrocket. One cup of canned corn has 384 milligrams sodium, while an ear of corn has a measly 13 milligrams.

If you insist on buying canned vegetables, take a "lesser of two evils" approach: Choose [canned goods](#) with a "no [salt](#) added" label, and then rinse the contents thoroughly before eating.

Remember, though, just because a vegetable is fresh or frozen doesn't necessarily put it on the menu. A 3.5-ounce serving of raw celery has about 130 milligrams of sodium, and that could really add up over time. Compare that to broccoli's modest 10 milligrams of sodium and it's easy to see which one makes it to the dinner plate. Like corn, fresh asparagus, green beans and potatoes have so little sodium, they're classified as sodium-free.

When it comes to cooking up main dish meats, becoming a food detective is even more important.



Cut the salt but keep the flavor in your meals. See more [pictures of sensational salads](#).

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