



Letter to the editor: The Pundit Speaks
By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.
June 26, 2011

"The Great Salt Debate"

For decades, we have been told, "Salt (sodium chloride) makes us retain excess fluid, raises our blood pressure (hypertension), burdens our heart and leads to an early death." But, is this true? Belgium researchers measured urinary salt (sodium) levels in 3,681 individuals over an eight-year period and found that, "Those with lower salt intake over the eight year period had a higher risk of heart attack and stroke, compared to those with a high salt intake - completely the opposite to what we are told." In short, they found that low salt intake does not prevent hypertension and it raises heart attack and stroke risk. Others, including the CDC, were quick to point out flaws with this study and suggested that it be taken "with a grain of salt." However, this is not the first study to show a higher death risk among low salt intakers. Editor of the American Journal of Hypertension, Dr. Michael Alderman, reported that, "Low salt intake meant a higher risk of death." Additionally, Alderman pointed out that other harmful things occur when we consume less salt, such as a risk for increased insulin resistance (diabetes), which is a major risk factor for heart disease. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), which based its recommendations on "strong science," we should not consume more than 1500 mg of sodium a day. The American Heart Institute states, "Some say that salt is the favorite ingredient of Americans, and many have acquired a taste for a high salt diet. One way to cut back is to skip the table salt. However, most sodium in the diet comes from packaged, processed foods. Eating these foods less often can reduce your intake of sodium and can help lower your blood pressure." Today, if your blood pressure is above 120/80, your doctor may recommend a low-salt diet or advise you to avoid salt completely. Yet, the Belgium investigators state, "The assumption that lower salt intake would in the long run lower blood pressure, to our knowledge, has not yet been confirmed in longitudinal population-based studies." Also, they surprisingly found that cardiovascular mortality risk (death from heart disease) was much higher among those with the lowest levels of sodium in their urine. They concluded, "Taken together, our current findings refute the estimates of computer models of lives saved and health care costs reduced with lower salt intake. Also, they do not support the current recommendations of a generalized and indiscriminate reduction of salt intake at the population level."

In the America that I love, we will readily question the dictates and mandates of the "food police." We are acutely aware that food recommendations change regularly. Nothing is etched in stone.

Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.
Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate
27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444
985-229-6955-Home / 985-229-3760 – Fax / 985-514-0578 – Cell
rhowesmd@hughes.net www.thepundit.com