

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Salt Not As Bad As Claimed”

We have been repeatedly cautioned about excessive salt intake. But, what is the current thinking? Going back to 1988, the INTERSALT study compared urinary sodium levels with high blood pressure in 10,000 people and found no statistically significant association between them. In 2011, a study in *JAMA* compared the urinary sodium levels of 3,681 people with their risk of dying over the course of eight years. They found, surprisingly, that the more sodium their subjects ate, the less likely they were to die. Also, while blacks, diabetics and others more likely to have heart problems are urged to slash their salt intake, a 2013 Institute of Medicine (IOM) review showed there was limited evidence such an ultra-low salt diet helped, and that too little salt might increase the risk of heart trouble. The IOM panel said that too little salt might increase the risk of heart trouble. A new study suggests that we may not have to worry so much about how salty we like our food. It has been claimed that sodium, if often ingested in large quantities, can lead to a range of cardiovascular problems, including hypertension. The World Health Organization (WHO) say that a person should not consume more than 2 grams of sodium per day, which is about 5 grams of salt per day. The American Heart Association (AHA) recommend no more than 2.5 grams of sodium per day, though they state that the ideal intake is of no more than 1.5 grams per day for an adult. However, there is little evidence in terms of improved health outcomes that individuals ever achieve at such a low level. A new study, in *The Lancet*, now suggests that we can be more lenient about our salt consumption without fearing that it will harm our cardiovascular health. A high intake of sodium did lead to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke — but only in communities where the average intake for an adult was greater than 5 grams per day (about 2.5 teaspoons of table salt). In communities that consumed less than 5 grams of sodium a day, the opposite was the case. Sodium consumption was inversely associated with myocardial infarction or heart attacks and total mortality, and there was no increase in stroke. Any health risk of sodium intake is eliminated with improved diet by adding fruits, vegetables, dairy foods, potatoes, and potassium-rich foods. Researchers found all major cardiovascular problems, including death, decreased where there is an increased consumption of potassium, found in fruits, vegetables, dairy foods, potatoes, and nuts and beans.

In the America that I love, we will not believe everything others claim. Past salt intake claims have been both unrealistic and too cautious.

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.iwillfindthecure.org

