

Say “no thanks” to salt!



By Leanna Knox

High blood pressure, or hypertension, is the number one risk factor for heart disease. Blood pressure measures the force of the blood against the blood vessel walls. If blood pressure is high, there can be damage to blood vessel walls, which promotes the buildup of fatty plaque. This build-up narrows and can eventually block arteries. Overtime, high blood pressure can strain and eventually weaken the heart. While many people have considered high blood pressure as something that only affects adults, this is unfortunately not the case. The rise in childhood obesity that has been seen in recent years has brought with it health problems such as hypertension. There is a clear link between weight and blood pressure levels, placing overweight children at a greater risk of having high blood pressure. In a group of 30 children, one child will have high blood pressure. Helping our children to make healthier food choices to reduce blood pressure levels can have a significant impact on their health.

As Canadians, shaking our salt habit would have a considerable effect on our health as a nation. Eating a diet that is high in salt has been linked to a number of health problems, including high blood pressure. It is thought that for one out of every three Canadians with hypertension, the reason for it is because they are eating a diet that is high in salt or sodium. The recommended intake is between 1,000 and 1,500 milligrams of sodium per day, depending on age. Most people, including children, consume more than double that amount every day. According to Statistics Canada, even young children between the ages of one and three were found to be taking in an average of 2,000 milligrams of sodium per day. There is definitely room for improvement when it comes to salt intake.

Many people are unaware of just how much salt they are taking in on a daily basis and many have already taken the healthy step of taking the salt shaker off their table. Yet, where is all the sodium coming from? Well, almost 80% is from what is added to processed foods or restaurant meals. A Canadian Nutrition Survey found that pizza, hamburgers, soup, pasta, sandwiches and hot dogs were the major sources of sodium in our diet. Fast food restaurants are a major source of sodium, even in the “kids’ meals”. A typical burger and fries meal for kids contains more

than 1,700 milligrams of sodium. More than the daily amount right there! Not surprisingly, many health groups are calling for our government to take action and regulate the amount of salt that food companies and restaurants are adding to products.

While eating high amounts of salt and sodium are a health concern at any age, it can have an even bigger impact during childhood. Children adapt to the flavours of the foods they are given at a young age. If they are exposed to salty foods early on, that is what they become used to. With these unhealthy tastes well developed in childhood, it becomes much harder to cut down on salt as they get older. Offer your children a healthy diet which focuses on vegetables, fruit, whole-grain breads and cereals. Cut back on their intake of sodium by taking the salt shaker off the dinner table, not adding salt during cooking, rinsing canned foods before serving them, limiting use of salty condiments such as ketchup, soy sauce, or mustard, and by enjoying more meals cooked at home. Help your children develop healthy food habits to prevent them from getting high blood pressure later.

Physical activity plays an important role in keeping blood pressure at healthy levels. Not only because it contributes to managing weight, physical activity also helps to strengthen the heart, reduces stress and boosts energy. While children are naturally full of energy, many are not being as active as they should be. More than half of Canadian children are not getting the activity they need for overall health and development. Many are spending a lot of time involved in sedentary activities like watching TV, playing video games or texting on their cell phones. Children should be getting 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity every day to stay healthy. Encourage your children to get up and get moving.

A recent study found that a child spending time in front of the television, even playing video games, has an increased risk of developing high blood pressure. Those with the most TV or screen time had higher blood pressure, whether the child was overweight or not. When children are spending time in front of the TV not only is this time that they are not being active, it often comes with unhealthy snacking behaviour and can interfere with sleep. These poor eating habits and lack of sleep can also raise blood pressure levels.

As parents, it is important to do all that you can help your child prevent hypertension, with a combination of physical activity, healthy eating and maintaining a healthy weight. Consuming too much salt is a definite health risk for your child. Put those salt shakers away, read the nutritional labels on foods and offer fewer canned, processed or fast food to your children. Visit www.sodium101.ca for a wide range of information on sources of sodium, tips for

reducing salt intake, cookbooks and more. While we can only hope that there will be government support to ensure that fast food restaurants offer healthier menu options and grocery store shelves have healthier products, don't wait to take action yourself to reduce your family's salt intake. Say "no thanks" to salt!

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