New Data Questions Wisdom of Eating Less Salt

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For years, doctors warned us that consuming too much salt can be very dangerous to our health. But one group of scientists at the Institute of Medicine (IOM) found that there's no hard evidence that reducing salt intake each day lowers people's risk of heart disease, according to a story reported by Minnpost.

The current dietary guidelines for people in the United States suggest that adults between ages 15 to 50 consume no more than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium daily. The guidelines also recommend that people at high risk of heart disease—in particular those age 51 or older, African Americans, and people with diabetes, heart or kidney disease—consume no more than 1,500 mg each day.

But after studying all the research to date, IOM's experts determined that cutting back to below 2,300 mg of salt each day could actually be dangerous for those at a high risk of heart problems.

The IOM report noted that the current guidelines for salt consumption are based on studies that say people's blood pressure tends to fall when they eat less sodium. Researchers combined this information with data from other studies that linked hypertension to an increased risk of heart disease and stroke. Then scientists estimated how many lives could be saved if people reduced their sodium intake as a way to avoid boosting blood pressure levels. But more recently, researchers started looking less at blood pressure as a measure of safe sodium levels. Instead they're focusing on the incidence rates of heart attacks and strokes that may be associated with sodium intake.

Because of the new statistics, which show no dramatic decrease in cardiac incidents for those who cut back, many in the health field are starting to wonder if there truly are any benefits to eating less salt.

But officials at the American Heart Association (AHA) disagree with IOM's key conclusions. "The [IOM] report is missing a critical component—a comprehensive review of well-established evidence which links too much sodium to high blood pressure and heart disease," said Nancy Brown, the association's CEO, in statement. As a result, the AHA is standing by its recommended quota of 1,500 mg of salt each day for those at risk of heart disease.

Although the debate rages on, one thing is clear: Americans consume more than the suggested amount of salt each day. (The average adult eats close to 3,400 mg—about 1.5 teaspoons—of salt each day.)

A separate finding showed that youth who consume high-sodium diets have an associated risk of high blood pressure. What's more, this study's results also showed that children who are overweight or obese seem to be more salt-sensitive than normal-weight kids. Click here to read more.

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