

# SALT

A very thin line between  
the good and the bad

*By Nancy Castro-Leal*



# **Power Up! Women advocate for bodies, voices and resources.**

**Seeking to connect and support  
Volunteer Food Handlers in the  
National School Nutrition  
Programme to have their jobs  
made visible, recognised, valued  
and remunerated.**



***POWER UP!***

# Salt: A very thin line between the good and the bad



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**The good is everything that we are and that is favourable to the human being while the bad is the opposite, signifying the negation of what we are and what does not favour us as human beings.**

**Fernando Savater**  
Philosopher &  
Author



Salt is perhaps the only rock eaten by humans daily. We use it in cooking, home remedies, cleaning and stain removing. Salt is also used as a preservative in food processing.

Salt is indispensable in every household, no matter where you live, your social class, religion or level of academic study. Whether you call it salt, letsoai, sout, usawoti, ityuwa, letwai, muntu, muno, salz, kachi, sal; sel or chumvi, salt is a top item on the list of your grocery shopping.

To understand why we used the words 'the good and the bad' in the article title, let's explore the history of salt and how it is used and works in our bodies.

It is believed that the Chinese pioneered the use of salt. According to historians, in 2670 BC, Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, was at a place that was surrounded by saltwater lakes. Huangdi saw that when the sun was hot, it dried the little puddles sprinkled around the lake, leaving tiny white crystals on the ground that seemed to preserve the dead fish.

Sea salt was the first kind of salt to be used by humans, and for many centuries. In ancient Rome, it was named "white gold."

The Romans were the first to use road transportation of salt from the seaside to inland. The empire used salt as a currency for paying soldiers and public officials – they received "salt" as payment. From this, we get the name for what we receive as payment for the work we do - salary, salario; salaire; salário; salaries.

The Egyptians used salt to preserve food and mummies

and for religious rituals. Different indigenous cultures in North, Central and South America attribute a mystic aspect to salt. The people have goddesses and rituals for honouring salt.

Humans discovered how to mine salt from underground deposits much later. Mined salt is used globally for cooking or as table salt. But some people are increasingly choosing to use sea salt, as it is seen as less harmful for humans.



**There must be something strangely sacred about salt, it is in our tears and in the sea.**

**Khalil Gibran**  
Writer & Poet



## Faith, culture, myth and traditional beliefs

Christians say, "You are the salt of the earth... and the light of the world" (Matt 5:13-16)

In Buddhism, salt represents the spiritual freedom called Nirvana. Sea water represents all humanity and the salt in the sea represents Nirvana. Just like all rivers flow into the sea and turn into salt water, in the end, all humans can be Buddhas and achieve Nirvana.

In Judaism, salt represents the action of preserving and preventing decomposition. Jewish people believe their nation's covenant with God will last forever, like salt.

Catholics take salt as a symbol of purity. Baptism candidates receive a few grains of salt in the mouth to symbolise the preservation of their faith and purification from original sin.

In religion, salt symbolises purity, fertility, health, protection, loyalty, hospitality, mutual trust or fidelity. Egyptian priests, for example, poured salt on epidemic plagued and war torn cities to expel demons.

Salt is associated with negative powers in some cultures. For instance:

- To borrow salt is to court bad luck, so buy and use your own salt

- Bad luck will come in if there is no salt in the house
- Spilling salt by mistake can bring back luck in your life. Pick up the spilled salt with your right hand, face forward and throw it over the left shoulder to avoid bad luck
- You will become 'salty' if someone spills salt on you and have challenges in your life.

You can't find the use of salt in big mythical gatherings or parties of demons and witches.

Across time and in different cultures, salt symbolises both negative powers and salvation. Some people believe you will have a negative experience if someone spills salt on you. But when you sprinkle salt on yourself, you are protected.

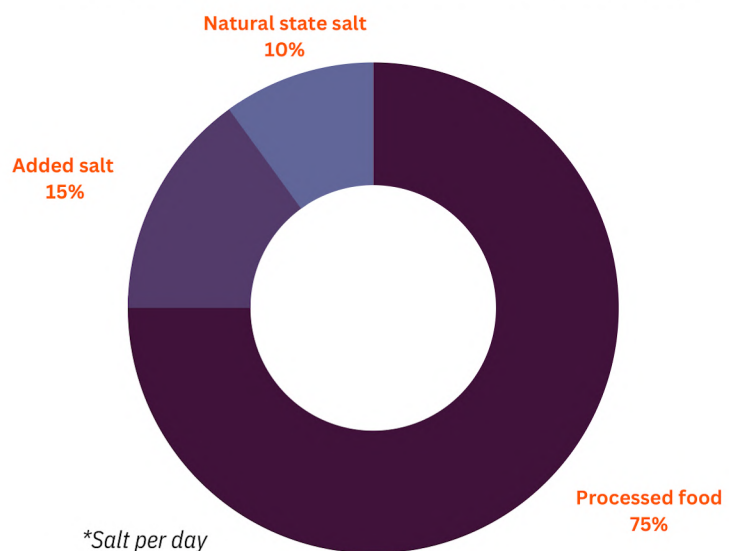
*Hormuz Island in Iran: Locals believe that the salt at the Goddess of Salt mountain has the power to release negative energy.  
(Picture credit: Saeed Abdolizadeh)*



## Is salt good or bad for humans?

Our health is affected by excess or the lack of salt. The amount of salt that a person consumes per day depends on the age, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). Babies up to 12 months should not consume added salt because the mother's milk or baby formula has the needed amounts. Children should consume a maximum of 2.3 grams per day of added salt, and adults up to 5g per day of added salt.

### Much of the salt we use is 'hidden'.



### Food in its natural state (raw and not processed) has little salt.

Chard or spinach are the vegetables with the highest salt level, with 150mg for every 100 grams.

One egg has 7mg.

One cup of milk is equivalent to 9.8mg of salt.

Dried apricots have the highest concentration of salt found in fruit, with 10mg per apricot.

A portion of 100grams of beef has 650mg of salt.



We consume on average **double** the amount of salt recommended by the World Health Organisation.

There's a huge difference when we compare the salt content of food in its natural state with ultra-processed food such as polony. Processed meat has an average salt content of 846mg per 100grams.

Like water, salt is indispensable for life but can be fatal when consumed in excess. The real culprit is processed and ultra-processed food because much salt is used to preserve products. Salt is a spice and has the potential to chemically enhance the flavour of all-natural products. Salt makes our palette recognise the taste of the salt rather than the taste of the food, and we find it tasteless without a lot of salt.

Globally, various agreements oblige the food industry to label products with nutritional information, for example, the amount of salt for every 100 grams of the product. The consumer can then know the risks and make informed choices and decisions.

Salt is labelled under different names and we should try to recognise and identify them all. Salt can appear as the chemical formula NaCl, or as sodium chloride and sodium. The actual word 'salt' rarely appears on product labels.

## GUIDE TO LABEL DESCRIPTIONS

- 100grams is equivalent to 2 cups of chopped spinach
- A lot of salt is equivalent to 480mg or more per 100grams
- "Low salt content" is 120mg or less per 100 grams



A teaspoon, or

**5g**

WHO guideline for a healthy portion of sugar per person per day.

## Salt is good because:

- Helps to maintain our bones in good condition when consumed in moderation
- Helps to prevent tooth cavities and ageing
- Acts as an anti-inflammatory
- Gives energy
- Reduces the necessity of insulin in the body
- Activates the production of sleep hormones
- The mineral helps to maintain the immune system
- Maintains the balance of liquids in the body. The body can't maintain hydration without salt
- Helps the nervous system to pass information in the body
- Helps with digestion and maintaining good levels of acid in the body
- Can be dissolved in water and used as an insect repellent and organic pesticide, or to clean vegetables.

## Excessive salt is bad because:

People who consume too much salt risk getting or worsening non-communicable diseases, such as cancer, heart attacks, strokes, asthma, diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis and kidney problems.

Our bodies can tell us when excessive use of salt starts to create damage. Do not ignore the signs. Limit your salt intake and have a medical check-up.

## Tips



Soak injured feet in salt water for 20-30 minutes. Salt has anti-inflammatory properties.



To reduce black rings under your eyes, place a small towel that is soaked in warm salt water.

**According to the WHO, excess salt consumption hugely stresses national health budgets. Some 9.4 million people die every year from eating too much salt. This tragedy must be recognised and prevented.**

## Some red flags to note:

- Being constantly thirsty
- Weight gain - high salt levels in food cause water retention, which can contribute to weight gain
- Loss of taste
- Waking with swollen eyes and cheeks
- Constant headache - excess salt can dilate veins in our brains and cause pain
- Kidney stones
- Hypertension
- Frequent illness
- Sleep disorders
- Excess salt in the blood - can only be detected in a blood test.

# How can we balance our daily intake of salt?

The WHO called for a 30 per cent global reduction in salt consumption by 2025 to prevent some 2.5 million deaths per year and reduce about 35% cases of non-communicable chronic diseases.

To arrive at the ideal 5grams of salt per day, everyone needs to play a role, from the government and food industry to the media and households. We must keep reviewing our food choices and cooking methods.

## Some actions to take

### Governments

- Create policies and incentives to encourage the production of healthy, low sodium food.

### The food industry

- Reduce the sodium content in products and promote healthy lifestyles and appreciation of the natural taste of food.

### The media

- Create awareness about good nutrition and healthy eating habits. Media can use their power to force food companies to act, for instance, hiking the cost of advertising any product with high levels of sodium.

### Individual households

- Can make a difference through various acts. For example, buying low-sodium products, using different ways to flavour food and eating more fruit and vegetables.

## Useful tricks for reducing our salt intake

- Do not buy food products without information on sodium content.
- Do not add salt during food preparation. Rather add salt at the end of cooking.
- Don't add salt if using factory-made products like tomato sauce, mayonnaise, soya sauce and flavouring stocks. These products have a lot of sodium.
- Cheese and bread dishes have excess salt. Eat with fresh vegetables and fruits.
- When cooking, use more herbs (fresh or dry) and less salt. Coriander, parsley, rosemary, curry and bay leaves are full of flavour.
- Substitute salt with flavourful vegetables and fruits in cooking. For example, celery, garlic, onion, tomatoes, lemons, peppers and chillies.
- Cook with flavourful spices such as cumin, peppers, turmeric, paprika and cayenne pepper.
- Add fruits to vegetable salads to make them more healthy and flavourful. Substitute high sodium salad dressings with oranges, berries, grapes, pawpaw, mangoes, avocado, pineapple and melons.
- Buy low sodium salt.
- Keep table salt away from the dining table.
- Avoid fast food and cold meats - these triple your levels of sodium.
- Drink two litres of water daily to help your kidneys eliminate excess salt.
- Eat healthy and delicious traditional food cooked as your grandmother and great-grandmother did.

The ball is now in your court. I hope you will choose the good side of salt.





**The work of feeding millions of learners must be seen as work deserving of recognition, value and appropriate salary and conditions at work.**