

Extension Education  
Laurie Bates News Column  
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## Don't Let Salt Free Intimidate You By Laurie Bates

Food can still taste delicious without all the sodium. You're trying to cut some salt out of your diet. Great, now your food has lost all flavor, right? Salt is an essential part of the human diet and body. Too much salt, however, can cause damage. Sodium forces you to retain water, which puts extra pressure on your blood vessels and forces your heart to work harder to pump blood. You are more unaware of how much salt you are eating than you think you are. The American diet is loaded with sodium from all the processed foods we tend to eat. Frozen meals, which are marketed at busy families who want something quick to make for dinner, are often full of sodium. Eating these foods occasionally is okay, but there are many college students and single parent families that rely on these meals nightly. Cooking from scratch and fresh food is the best way to control how much sodium is in your diet, and seasoning food without salt is another good helper.

### **Seasoning Without Salt**

When you begin cooking without salt, at first it may seem a little intimidating. Some people have become habitual salters- adding the mineral without tasting the food first, or worse yet, adding it simply because it is what they have always done.

### **What Spices Can Be Used as a Substitute for Salt?**

There is no spice that exactly imitates the way salt tastes, but there are some that have similar profiles. When looking for salt substitutes, try these herbs and spices:

**Parsley** - Instead of bogging down your soups or stews with even more sodium than they probably already have, give them a nice lift with this herb.

**Ginger** is wonderful for flavoring meats and seafood. It has a sort of spicy flavor.

**Basil** - This flavor combination is similar to salt in the way that the savory flavor of the tomato is enhanced by the sweetness of the basil leaves. Basil does the same thing for roasted vegetables too.

**Cinnamon** is excellent with whole grains like quinoa.

**Garlic** goes on nearly everything, with the only exception of sweets.

**Onion** does the same thing for many savory dishes that garlic does. Meat, root vegetables, and soups all benefit from the addition of onion.

**Lemongrass** is usually found in Asian dishes, but can go well with soups, stews, and on meats as a salt substitute.

**Chiles** are an absolute delight in foods that need a unique twist.

These spices are great for starting out with. This will help you ease into seasoning without salt.

If you are curious about what spices have a salty taste, the answer is that none of them do, really. The spices we have suggested above for use as alternatives are those which enhance the dish and give good flavor boosts, eliminating the need to add salt to the dish altogether.

1. **Don't beat yourself up** - your goal is not to completely eliminate all the salt entering your system, after all the human body needs a certain amount of sodium to survive. Your goal is to get your sodium intake down to the level that your doctor prescribed.

2. **Immediately stop adding salt** to your food - don't add it to the meals that you are cooking and remove the salt shaker from the dining room table. If you are like most of us, we grew up with a salt shaker on the table and it is second nature to salt your food before even taking the first bite. So instead start to experiment. Fill the shaker, formerly known as the salt shaker, with some salt-free herbs and spices - Basil, Oregano, Lemon Pepper, Garlic, Onion and Parsley are all good options. Start off with small amounts until you find a combination that you enjoy.

3. **Buy a peppermill** if you don't already have one - try grinding fresh pepper.

4. **Learn to read food labels** - by reading labels and comparing products side-by-side you will start to see some amazing differences between products that may seem identical. The **2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that Americans** consume less than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium per day which amounts to one teaspoon or 6 grams of salt per day as part of a healthy eating pattern.

5. **Go fresh** - typically you don't have to worry about high sodium levels in fresh fruits and vegetables. Fresh lean meat, fish, and chicken tend to be low in sodium as well.

6. **Learn how to fully experience herbs** - before adding herbs to your dish crush them in your hand to bring out the full taste. Also, most herbs give the most flavor when added towards the end of the cooking process.

Go for small changes to start. Begin with targeting just one meal a day. Once you have that as a habit, then add a second meal. This will get you on the right path before you know it. Eventually you might not even miss the salt as your taste buds will come alive as they are exposed to a world of amazing new tastes and flavors.