
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Less salt, better health



This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Georgie

And I'm Georgie. Do you know the five tastes which give food its flavour, Neil?
There's sweet...

Neil

Yes... and er, sour, bitter...

Georgie

And salty! Everyone knows that salt makes food taste better by enhancing the flavours of the ingredients. There's even a phrase you'll see in many recipes – 'add a pinch of salt'.

Neil

But exactly how much salt makes a 'pinch' of salt? The World Health Organisation, or WHO, recommends a daily salt intake of less than 5g, about the same as a teaspoon. In fact, the human body needs salt - at least 1g a day to survive. But most of us eat far too much, increasing the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease. In this programme, we'll be asking: how much salt is too much? And, as usual, we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary as well.

Georgie

Great! But first I have a question for you, Neil. The reason it's difficult to know how much salt you consume is that it's hidden in food, especially processed food. So, which of the following everyday foods do you think contains most salt? Is it:

- a) meat?
- b) bread? or,
- c) pasta?

Neil

Well, I'm going to guess that meat is the saltiest of those foods.

Georgie

OK Neil, I'll reveal the answer later in the programme. Marian Sumbiva lives in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, a country where people eat, on average, 17g of salt a day. That's more than three times the amount recommended by the WHO. Here, Marian explains some of the reasons behind this to BBC World Service programme, 'The Food Chain':

Marian Sumbiva

We consume lots of salt, which is due to historical heritage, because when we were **nomads**, for centuries and centuries we travelled and wandered across the steppes, and here, we had to carry lots of meat which could be **preserved** only adding salt. And even the milk products, the **dairy products**, are also very much salty for the same reasons.

Neil

Besides improving its flavour, salt can be used to **preserve** food, to stop it from going bad. Traditionally, people in Kazakhstan were **nomads**, they travelled from place to place with their animals, rather than living in one place all the time. Treating food with salt gave them enough to eat during the long winter months. They even did it with **dairy products**, foods which are made from milk, such as cheese and butter.

Georgie

So, salt has a long, and useful, history. But there's a big difference between traditional Kazakh **nomads** and the health problems associated with modern processed food. When we eat too much salt, the body dilutes it by retaining water. And as a result, the heart works harder to pump liquid around the body. This causes high blood pressure which, over time, can lead to heart disease.

Neil

Globally, governments are fighting this health risk in different ways. The Australian government reduced its recommended salt intake to 6g a day, while the British government has passed laws forcing food companies to reduce the amount of salt they use, and now recommends just 5g of salt per day.

Georgie

Clare Collins is professor of nutrition at the University of Newcastle in Australia. Here, she explains more about these salt recommendations to BBC World Service programme, 'The Food Chain':

Prof Clare Collins

I think you just gotta **take a step back**, and **look at the bigger picture**, like arguing whether it should be 5g or 6g... The issue is that around the world, salt intakes are very high, contributing to high blood pressure, contributing to **premature** strokes, **premature** mortality, and we need to address it in a way that's culturally appropriate for each country.

Georgie

Instead of arguing over grams of salt, Professor Collins thinks we should **take a step back** and **look at the bigger picture**. She uses two idioms: **take a step back**, which means to temporarily withdraw from a situation in order to think about it more calmly, and **look at the bigger picture** - to consider the overall meaning of something, not just the details.

Neil

Yes, the problem remains that overconsumption of salt is causing **premature** health problems, problems which are happening sooner than they should. By

limiting salt and processed food, most people can enjoy long, healthy lives. And if you don't like your food unsalted, try adding herbs and spices instead.

Georgie

Well, speaking of salty foods, I think it's time to reveal the answer to my question, Neil. If you remember, I asked you which everyday food contains most salt.

Neil

And I guessed it was meat...

Georgie

Which was... the correct answer! Meat contains the highest amount of salt - around 19% - followed by bread with 14%, and pasta with 7%. OK, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned in this programme starting with the verb 'to **preserve** food', meaning to do something to stop it rotting so it can be eaten later.

Neil

Nomads are people who travel from one place to another, often with animal livestock, rather than living in one place all the time.

Georgie

Dairy products are foods such as cheese and butter, which are made from milk.

Neil

If you **take a step back**, you temporarily remove yourself from a situation in order to reevaluate it.

Georgie

The idiom 'to **look at the bigger picture**' means to consider the overall meaning of something rather than the specific details.

Neil

And finally, the adjective **premature** describes something which happens too soon or before the proper time. Once again, our six minutes are up. Goodbye for now!

Georgie

Bye!

Correction: In the programme we say that meat contains 19% salt, making it the saltiest type of everyday food. In fact it's some processed meat and meat dishes that contains 19% salt, according to the British Heart Foundation.

VOCABULARY

preserve (food)

treat food to prevent it from rotting so that it can be stored and eaten later

nomads

people who travel from one place to another, often with animal livestock, rather than living in one place all the time

dairy products

food which is made from milk, for example butter, cheese or yoghurt

take a step back

(idiom) temporarily withdraw from a situation in order to think about it more calmly

look at the bigger picture

(idiom) consider the overall meaning of something as opposed to specific details

premature

happening too soon or before the proper time