

Shaking it Up – is Sea Salt Healthier?

Sea salt and table salt have similar nutritional value, so why all the health claims for sea salt? “Sea salt is very popular right now, but consumers need to know that both contain sodium and that means both can raise blood pressure.” says Susan Mills-Gray, Nutrition/Health Specialist with University of Missouri Extension.

Sea salt is harvested from seawater through evaporation. Sea salt is available in fine or coarse grain. It has a slightly different taste than table salt because of the different minerals it contains. Most sea salts doesn't contain iodine or any other additives. Sea salt generally is far from pure — the impurities are its big selling point and frequently an identifying mark, such as the tiny bits of clay that give gray sea salt its color, or the iron-rich red volcanic clay added to Hawaiian sea salt.

Table salt is typically from rock salt, which is mined from mineral deposits. Table salt is a fine-grained salt that often contains added iodine, which is necessary for normal thyroid function. Most table salts also contain anti-caking ingredient.

Since the underground salt deposits that produce most table salt are the result of evaporating seawater or salty lakes, you'd think the chemistry would be pretty much the same, and mostly it is. Both rock salt and sea salt contain sodium chloride, and other minerals such as calcium, potassium, and magnesium sulfates. However, when a large body of water evaporates, the chemicals in it precipitate out in stages — calcium compounds get deposited first, then sodium, and finally magnesium and potassium. Because of this, a rock salt deposit is often a more pure mass of sodium than what you get by drying out seawater commercially. Since rock salt destined for human consumption is typically processed to remove grit and other impurities, by the time it reaches the shaker table salt is nearly pure sodium. The additional minerals and impurities in sea salt dilute the sodium levels slightly.

If you favor foods with fewer additives, you may prefer sea salt. But there's no evidence that the additives in table salt are harmful to your health. Although your body needs some sodium to function properly, most people eat too much, which can lead to high blood pressure. Whether you use sea salt, table salt or some other type of salt, most experts recommend limiting sodium to 1,500 and 2,300 milligrams daily. One level teaspoon of table salt contains about 2400 milligrams sodium, while one teaspoon of sea salt has about 2250 milligrams. Based on much research, experts believe that 1200 milligrams or less a day is best for lowering high blood pressure.

“From a cooking perspective the main difference is texture and taste. Table salt is very fine which makes it easy to dissolve. Sea salt is coarser and adds a bit of crunch and flavor difference due to the mineral and impurities content.” says Mills-Gray.

Mills-Gray concludes, “Sea salt and table have similar nutritional value, and basically salt is salt when it comes to increasing chronic disease risk.”

For more information contact your local MU Extension Center or this faculty member directly at mills-grays@missouri.edu.

Sources: Environmental Nutrition, May 2009; NIH: American Heart Association