

VITAL SIGNS

Patterns: Less Salt Isn't Always Better for the Heart

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For years, experts have believed that lowering sodium consumption reduces the risk of heart disease. Now a large new study suggests that it may not be so simple.

The scientists studied an international group of 28,880 men and women over age 55 at high risk for heart disease. They estimated salt intake by testing urine and followed the group for almost five years. The study appears in the Nov. 23 issue of The Journal of the American Medical Association.

The researchers found — unsurprisingly — that high sodium intake significantly increased the risk for heart problems.

But too little sodium was almost as bad as too much. Compared with those who excreted 4 to 6 grams of sodium daily, people who excreted 2 to 3 grams were at 19 percent greater risk for death from a cardiovascular event, and the less they consumed the greater their risk.

Nutritionists recommend a daily intake of 1.5 grams of salt for people with heart problems, a level that in this study increased the risk for cardiovascular death by 37 percent.

“It’s still important to avoid consuming too much salt,” said Andrew Mente, an author of the study and an assistant professor of epidemiology at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. “But people who are consuming moderate amounts may not have to decrease their intake further.”

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