Dear Alice,

I have recently started a low-sodium diet to lose water weight. I have one burning question though... Does salt substitute make you retain water like salt does or not? It tastes very similar but it is potassium instead of sodium chloride. Please help me.

Thank You,
Ashley

Answer

Dear Ashley,

The simple answer to your burning question is no — salt substitutes won’t make you retain water. As you mentioned, these substitutes contain potassium chloride instead of sodium chloride (more on this in a bit!). That said, before you completely eliminate salt from your diet, keep in mind that the average person does need 1500 milligrams (mg) to 2300 mg of salt per day for optimal kidney and motor function; as such, too much or too little salt may negatively impact your health. Before making a switch, you may wish to speak with a health care provider; salt substitutes aren’t for everyone as they could lead to potassium buildup in people taking certain medications for kidney, heart, or liver conditions. To reduce sodium intake, you might first try making changes to your diet and substitute salt with other flavorful additions such as herbs and spices. Learning more about the differences between salt and salt substitutes, as well as other alternatives to salt can help you make the decision that is best for you.

To better understand how salt differs from salt substitutes, it’s helpful to tease apart the compounds they consist of — sodium chloride and potassium chloride, respectively. Salt is made up of sodium chloride, which is highly water-soluble. This means it can easily bond with water molecules in your body, leading to an increase in blood volume. However, when there’s an excessive amount of sodium chloride in the body, it becomes difficult for the kidneys to produce enough urine to expel the extra water from the body, resulting in higher water retention. To compensate, other parts of your body are kicked into overdrive to lower the salt concentration, which may result in the hardening and tightening of arteries. Over time, this process may lead to heart disease, high blood pressure, and cardiovascular disease. On the other hand, potassium
chloride found in salt substitutes isn’t as water soluble as sodium chloride; it doesn’t bond to water molecules as easily, so it doesn’t lead to excess water retention. However, not all salt substitutes are the same; some salt substitutes are a combination of sodium chloride and potassium chloride, while others are just potassium chloride.

If you’re looking to reduce your sodium intake through changes in your diet, you may consider experimenting with your cooking. Instead of adding salt to your food, try using lemon juice, garlic, or pepper. You can dress up your meals with fresh herbs such as rosemary, tarragon, mint, or sage, and expand your horizons with spices like peppercorn, chili, and paprika. Not only will your food have richer and more complex flavors, you may end up preferring a mix of these spices and seasonings over the salt they replace!

While you experiment with your cooking, you can also keep an eye out to avoid these highly salted foods:

- Processed meats — including cured or smoked meats, bacon, hot dogs, sausage, and ham
- Prepackaged spice mixes
- Foods packed in salts or vinegar— including anchovies, olives, pickles, and sauerkraut
- Many snack foods — including chips and crackers
- Soy and Worcestershire sauces
- Pre-made salad dressings and salad dressing mixes
- Cheese

List adapted from MedlinePlus [2].

To be sure you’re avoiding salty foods, you may want to pay close attention to food labels. Additionally, labels such as “sodium-free” and “salt-free” have different meanings compared to “low sodium” or “lite.” If a product is labeled “sodium free” or “salt free,” this means it contains less than five mg of sodium per serving. While “reduced sodium” may seem like the healthy option, this label means that the product contains at least 25 percent less sodium than the regular version. If some products start with very high sodium levels, the reduced version may still have a lot of sodium, even though it was reduced. “Lite” means that the product contains at least 50 percent less sodium than the regular version, and “no salt added” or “unsalted” means there hasn’t been any extra salt added. It’s also worth noting that sodium doesn’t just come from salt; many other ingredients such as monosodium glutamate (MSG) and baking soda (sodium bicarbonate) contribute to your overall sodium levels. If you’re eating out, you may not have access to food labels.

As you explore new ways to approach food, you can check out the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity [3] archives for tips on healthier eating. Additionally, you may want to speak with a registered dietitian to help you navigate choices that contain less sodium. The good news is that salt is an acquired taste – by slowly reducing the amount of salt in your diet, you’ll likely rely on it less for flavor. Over time, some salted foods might even taste too salty for you!

Happy eating!

Alice!

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