

Should you be afraid of consuming salt?

Unless you have very specific health concerns, eating too much salt is generally not bad for you. If you have advanced heart failure or advanced kidney failure, for example, then you do have to be very careful of your salt. But for the most part, eating salt is not that detrimental to your health. For example, the government has always recommended that we eat a low salt diet because they think that our blood pressure will drop. The amount of drop of blood pressure by eating a very low salt diet is actually very, very small. So the magnitude of the benefit is very small, but it's not clear whether that will translate into lower risk of heart disease or other diseases.

Several years ago, there was a very large study called the PURE Study, which looked at sort of the optimal amount of salt that people should be eating. And surprisingly, those eating a very low salt diet didn't have any advantage. The optimal level of salt was actually around three to four grams per day, which is actually not very different from the average North American person. So except in very rare circumstances, you don't have to worry about salt. If you eat more salt, your kidneys will get rid of it. If you eat too little salt, your kidneys will reabsorb all that salt so that you have the optimal amount of salt in your body at all times.

If you look across countries, for example, you can look at Japan, for example, which is by far and away the country that eats the most salt in the world per capita. And they are also one of the healthiest people in the world, if you look at life expectancy, heart disease and so on. So there's other differences between Americans and Japanese as well, but you have to say that if salt is really such an important bad part of the diet, how can one of the world's healthiest populations be eating so much salt? The answer is that salt is really just a natural mineral, that our bodies have evolved ways to deal with too much salt and too little salt.