



Rethinking Salt

By Gerard L. Guillory, M.D.

Manufacturers of many food items today boast that their products contain sea salt. Is this a claim worth making? Does sea salt provide benefits that ordinary table salt doesn't? Many people also wonder whether it is important to buy salt that contains iodine.

These are all questions that I frequently hear from patients. I hope this article helps clarify some of the issues and answer your questions.

Ordinary table salt is a highly processed and bleached form of sodium chloride. Minerals that are of benefit to your health, including zinc, iron and magnesium, are usually stripped away during processing. The natural taste of salt also is typically stripped away during processing.

In contrast, unrefined sea salt contains 40 or more minerals and trace elements that aren't found in ordinary table salt. Often, our bodies are deficient in many of these minerals.

Perhaps the most popular brand of unrefined sea salt is Celtic Sea Salt, harvested off the coast of France. The methods used to harvest Celtic salt leave the beneficial minerals and the natural taste intact.

As many of you know, I enjoy cooking and have found that unrefined sea salts are much more flavorful than ordinary table salt is. Although unrefined salts also are more expensive than table salt, they are well worth the price.

Keep in mind, however, that the term *sea salt* can refer to any salt that comes from the sea. Some sea salts are refined and adulterated and may not be any better for your health than is ordinary table salt.

This leads us to the question of iodine, a trace element that is essential to sustain life. Your body can't manufacture iodine, so you must ingest it. One reason that this is critical is that the thyroid hormone molecule is composed of iodine, and iodine deficiency may produce enlargement of the thyroid or goiter. In addition to thyroid disorders, iodine deficiency has been associated with chronic fatigue, autoimmune disorders, sinus congestion, cysts of the ovaries and breast, and various cancers (including breast, prostate, thyroid and ovarian).

In recent generations, iodine deficiency has tended to occur largely only in developing countries; however, a resurgence of this once-common problem is occurring in developed countries as a result of decreased salt intake and the removal of iodine during commercial bread making.

The problem historically has been less common in coastal areas, where iodine is plentiful in the soil, and rare in countries such as Japan, where intake of foods from the sea is high. Seafood and sea vegetables (such as seaweed) are the major natural dietary sources of iodine.

As growing numbers of health-conscious consumers switch to sea salt, which isn't commonly fortified with iodine, the problem has grown in the United States and other developed countries. As I predicted with vitamin D deficiency, you can expect to hear more about iodine deficiency in coming years.

One key reason salt intake has been on the decrease is that, for years, Americans have been led to believe that dietary sodium can cause an increase in hypertension and cardiovascular disease.

Medical researchers today are finding that salt probably isn't as harmful as we once believed. On the contrary, there might be some health benefits associated with intake of unrefined sea salt. This doesn't mean that unrestrained use of salt is a good idea. What it means is that, with a doctor's guidance, you might rethink your use of salt. But be careful what you buy.

I recommend that you use an unrefined sea salt for cooking. A high-quality unrefined sea salt is more flavorful than table salt and offers potential health benefits as well. However, you may need to take supplemental iodine.

With guidance from your physician, you should be able to obtain sufficient iodine to offset the risk of health problems associated with iodine deficiency. A word of caution: Excessive iodine ingestion may cause problems with an overactive thyroid gland, also referred to as hyperthyroidism.

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