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NUTRITION

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SAYONARA, SALT? The New York City Health Department has a plan that could save 150,000 lives nationwide—every year. In January 2009 it launched an initiative to encourage manufacturers to cut sodium in packaged foods in half. Most Americans consume more than twice the recommended daily sodium limit. (The limit is 2,300 milligrams—the amount in just 1 teaspoon of table salt.) That may not be a problem for some people, but it's a major health concern for the two-thirds of U.S. adults who are "salt sensitive": when they increase their salt consumption they see a steep rise in blood pressure. In fact, experts advise individuals at risk for "salt sensitivity" (anyone older than 40, black or who already has high blood pressure) to cap their daily sodium intake at 1,500 milligrams ($\frac{2}{3}$ teaspoon salt).

An industry-wide reduction in sodium in packaged foods could have a huge effect on health. "The majority of the sodium we eat is in packaged and prepared foods," says Darwin R. Labarthe, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D., director of the CDC's Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention. This may explain why the New York City initiative has gained the support of other state health departments and health authorities, including the American Heart Association and American Medical Association.

Food manufacturers are getting the message. Campbell's is debuting a lower-sodium version of its famous tomato soup with 32 percent less sodium than the original (dropping from 710 to 480 milligrams per serving). Campbell's isn't alone: the number of products touting their "lower sodium" status has more than doubled over the last five years, with other major brands, such as Del Monte, General Mills and Kraft, also bringing out lines.

But beware: a can of soup or broth, or any food really, with a "reduced sodium" label may actually have as much sodium as a "regular" version of another brand. The term "reduced sodium"—also called "lower sodium"—is regulated by the FDA and means only that the product contains at least 25 percent less than its original version. If you're really watching your intake, look for "low sodium" on the label: that product can't have more than 140 milligrams of sodium per 100 grams (about 336 milligrams per cup).

BOTTOM LINE: Pay less attention to callouts on the front of packages and instead home in on the sodium information on Nutrition Facts panels. In the EATINGWELL Test Kitchen, we try to limit the amount of sodium in our recipes and use reduced-sodium products, such as broths and stocks (with 440 to 580 milligrams of sodium per cup), whenever possible. If you have hypertension or are salt-sensitive, you may want to use low-sodium versions instead.

—Rachel Meltzer Warren, M.S.

Even if you're watching your sodium intake, you can enjoy sea salts. While gram for gram sea salts contain as much sodium as table salt, their larger crystals and unique flavors, derived from various sources, may result in your using less salt overall, says Chef Kyle Shadix, M.S., R.D., director at Nutrition + Culinary Consultants in New York City. Sel Gris de l'Île de Ré (left) gets its color from gray clay; Maldon (center) has a distinct fine-flake crystal structure; and Himalayan Pink (right) is named for the mountains where it's mined. Another way to minimize sodium: don't salt while you're cooking and instead simply sprinkle a pinch of coarse sea salt on your finished dish before serving. Find interesting sea salts at gourmet shops or online at atthemeadow.com.