



The Salt of Life by Katherine Krumwiede

There has been a proliferation of articles lately concerning sodium consumption and its deleterious effects on our health.

The current USDA dietary guidelines recommend 1500 milligrams per day of sodium for folks with high blood pressure and other health conditions. 1500 milligrams of salt is roughly equivalent to 2/3 of a teaspoon of salt. For those without health conditions the new recommendation is 2300 milligrams per day - not much more than a teaspoon. The new recommendations are an effort to reduce high blood pressure and heart disease. What the USDA doesn't differentiate is the difference in quality of sodium. Salt (Na - an organic substance) and table salt or sodium chloride (NaCl - an inorganic substance) are two very different things.

Table salt/sodium chloride is a highly-processed salt. It is mined from underground salt mines, heated to over 1200 degrees Fahrenheit, and stripped of all its minerals except sodium and chloride. The high heat processing alters its chemical bonds, thus the body cannot break the bonds to access the sodium. Table salt is not easily excreted from the body. The body will try to surround the table salt with water in order to break the bond and free the sodium, but it can't dismantle the inorganic substance. This results in fluid retention and often times high blood pressure. The saying "the solution to pollution is dilution" certainly seems appropriate where table salt and high blood pressure are concerned.

Salt (organic sodium) is a mineral/electrolyte that is vital to our good health. This is the kind of sodium that you find in sea salt, celery, and sesame seeds. As an organic substance it is easily excreted from the body. It is necessary for proper calcium absorption, fluid balance, and is critical to the functioning of the brain, liver, lymph, kidneys, spleen and blood. Interestingly, there are many health problems associated with a deficiency of organic sodium: gallstones, kidney stones, hardening of the arteries, arthritis, and restless legs to name a few.

The majority of sodium consumption comes from processed foods that contain sodium chloride. It's estimated that the average man consumes 10,000 milligrams of sodium per day, and the average woman consumes 7,000 milligrams. February 14's issue of Newsweek reported on "America's Saltiest Dishes" with Applebee's sizzling skillet steak fajita's coming in at 6,800 mg of sodium. I can't imagine how much water that must take to wash down.

It's no surprise that we like foods that contain salt. Salt is a powerful flavor enhancer and food preservative. Margaret Visser, a 20th century author describes salt as "the policeman of taste: it keeps the various flavors of a dish in order and restrains the stronger from tyrannizing over the weaker." Luckily our palates can be retrained to be more sensitive to sodium (it takes about six weeks), so that we can savor the flavor of salt rather than be knocked over by it. Of course, home cooking using a lovely sea salt is another way to control the quality and quantity of sodium you ingest. I'm fond of the sea salts offered by Mountain Rose Herbs. I often use dried seaweed as salt in eggs, soups and salads. Nothing beats Ryan Drum's Kelp Primo Pieces for healthy sodium with a bunch of trace minerals to boot. However, all of Ryan's seaweed is sold out until June of 2011.

Salt is the only rock directly consumed by man. It corrodes but preserves, desiccates but is wrested from the water. It has fascinated man for thousands of years not only as a substance he prized and was willing to labour to obtain, but also as a generator of poetic and of mythic meaning. The contradictions it embodies only intensify its power and its links with experience of the sacred.

– Margaret Visser