

## Salty Facts

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD



**Sodium is an essential mineral that we need to get every day for normal health.**

This mineral is found in sodium chloride, also known as table salt. Foods made with sodium-containing additives, such as sodium bicarbonate (baking soda), sodium benzoate and monosodium glutamate, also contribute sodium to the diet.

**The body needs some sodium to function properly.** However, many Americans get too much each day. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that adults have fewer than 2,300 mg per day. However, most Americans get closer to 3,400 mg of sodium per day. That can be a problem since high-sodium diets may increase the risk of developing high blood pressure, which can lead to heart disease.

**Which foods have the most salt?** More than 70% of the sodium in the diet comes from ultra-processed and packaged foods, such as:

- Salty snacks (chips, pretzels).
- Deli meat.
- Pickles.
- Instant noodles.
- Fast food such as pizza, burritos and burgers.
- Canned foods such as soup.
- Condiments, such as soy sauce, teriyaki and fish sauce.



**The good news?** The salt you use (from a salt shaker) while cooking and eating only contributes about 10% of the sodium in your diet. To reduce salt, cook at home more often than eating fast food. Here are some other tips for reducing sodium:

- Choose fewer ultra-processed foods and more whole foods, such as vegetables, fruit, grains, fish and poultry.
- Read food labels for the Daily Value (DV) for sodium. Products with 5% DV or less of sodium per serving are considered low in sodium, while those with 20% DV or more are considered high in sodium.
- Read labels on sauces, dressings and condiments. Some can have 500 to 1,000 mg of sodium per tablespoon. Make your own lower-sodium sauces.

## Diet Culture

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**Diet culture is a set of beliefs that glorify thinness above all else, including health.** It's easy to fall for this thinness narrative, since it is reinforced by social media, pop culture and advertising. If you've seen ads for "guilt-free ice cream" or ones that portray happiness after weight loss, you've witnessed diet culture and its unrealistic beauty standards.

**You can quickly spot diet culture, as it:**

- Labels foods as "good" or "bad."
- Equates weight with morality.
- Says smaller bodies are better and more disciplined.
- Stigmatizes larger bodies as lazy or unhealthy.

**Diet culture can damage mental and physical health.** It can make you feel bad about your perfectly functioning body. The constant barrage of pressure to conform to an unrealistic body size can lead to:

- Harmful fad diets.
- Eating disorders.
- Malnutrition.
- Weight loss and gain.
- Low self-esteem.
- Anxiety.
- Depression.



**How can you protect yourself?** Start by challenging diet culture's messages and question media that promotes thinness. Remember that what you see on TV and social media is not always real. And celebrities have personal chefs and trainers to help them maintain the appearance they need for their careers. Social media influencers may use image editing and filter apps to create unrealistic images.

**Instead, appreciate what your body can do rather than how it looks.** If this seems impossible, help is available from dietitians or therapists who practice through an **intuitive eating** lens. They work with you to dismantle diet culture and teach you to enjoy eating again by listening to your body's cues instead of following rigid food and exercise rules. Search for a practitioner at [intuitiveeating.org/professionals/](https://intuitiveeating.org/professionals/).

**Another important step is to diversify your social media feeds** by following evidence-based content provided by professionals, rather than diet influencers with no credentials (and sometimes altered photos).

# Emotional Support Animals

**Pets can provide companionship and emotional comfort.** Although that's not news to anyone who has ever had a beloved cat or dog, research from the National Institutes of Health confirms having a pet can result in multiple positive emotional and physiological benefits for pet owners, including lowering stress and improving mood.



**When animals provide comfort and companionship to people with emotional or mental health challenges,** pets (whether dogs, cats or other animals) are considered Emotional Support Animals. People who have ESAs often report less depression, anxiety and loneliness, helping them become more outgoing and active.

**These animals do not have special training or abilities to assist people with disabilities** and do not qualify as service animals. The Americans with Disabilities Act defines service animals as “dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities.” For example, service dogs can guide the visually impaired, pull wheelchairs, turn lights on and off, retrieve dropped objects and more. The act makes clear pets that simply provide emotional comfort are not service animals.

**However, some state and local laws have broader definitions.** That's why it's important to check with local government agencies to learn if ESAs in your area qualify for public access (e.g., riding with your ESA on a public bus). The ADA also recommends checking with a college or university to see if an emotional support animal is allowed in a dorm before your offspring takes a dog or cat to school.

## Q: Why is grip strength important?

**A:** **Grip strength is a measure of overall health.** The force you exert when you squeeze an object depends on the strength of your hands, wrists and forearms. As measured with a hand dynamometer, lower grip strength is correlated with poorer health. In some studies, a weak grip is defined as fewer than 57 pounds for men or 35 pounds for women.



**Research shows greater grip strength is associated with better well-being.** It's an indicator of the muscle strength you have throughout your body. You need strong muscles for walking, climbing stairs, avoiding falls and performing daily activities. People with stronger grips tend to stay more active as they grow older, which leads to a longer life expectancy.

**Also, a strong grip is correlated with a stronger immune system and greater resistance to infectious diseases.** The risk goes down for chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. Insomnia, depression and cognitive impairment occur less frequently in people with more robust grip strengths.

**Note:** People who have wrist arthritis have a decreased grip strength but can be in good health otherwise.

— Elizabeth Smoots, MD

# Prescription Medicine: Cost-Trimming Strategies

**Even with insurance, prescribed medication can still put a dent in your finances.** But prescribed drugs are important for your health, whether you need antibiotics for a week or two, or medication daily, such as insulin for diabetes, for an ongoing health problem. Unfortunately, some people skip getting prescriptions filled because of the cost and may end up with more serious health problems.

### Tips that are easy on your wallet:

**Make sure your pharmacy is in your insurance provider's network.** If you have a new health plan, or you've moved to another location, don't assume you have prescription coverage at your local pharmacy. Check with your health insurance.

**If your prescription is for a brand name drug, ask your health care provider or pharmacist if there's a generic version.** Generics have the same active ingredients as brand names, but typically cost much less.

**Consider buying in bulk if you take daily medications.** Mail-order pharmacies often send larger orders (e.g., a 90-day supply) at a significant discount.

**Check your local, independent pharmacy, if available.** Community pharmacies usually have more leeway in pricing prescription drugs than big chain pharmacies, according to the National Community Pharmacists Association.

**Consider a pill splitter if you need a dose of a medication twice a day.** Some medications come in a less expensive double dose that can be safely split. Talk to your pharmacist before going this route to make sure it is safe and won't reduce the medication's effectiveness.

**Talk openly about your finances with your provider.** If the cost prevents you from taking your medication as prescribed, your provider can often help you find less costly therapies or other more affordable forms of the medication. You can also look online for coupons.



The Smart Moves Toolkit, including this issue's printable download, [Understanding Cancer](https://personalbest.com/extras/25V10tools), is at [personalbest.com/extras/25V10tools](https://personalbest.com/extras/25V10tools).

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