We are a nation that loves salt. Unfortunately, too much sodium can cause you to retain excess fluid in the body, putting pressure on your heart. This can lead to high blood pressure, one of the major risk factors for heart disease. The American Heart Association estimates that about one in three Americans will be diagnosed with high blood pressure at some point in their lives. For people with diabetes, their chances of also getting high blood pressure are doubled.

Sodium is an important mineral to the body. It helps keep body fluids in balance; helps the body to absorb certain nutrients; and also aids in muscle performance and sending nerve messages. Excessive sodium in the diet is linked with high blood pressure or hypertension. Hypertension can result in heart disease, kidney failure or stroke.

The connection between salt and high blood pressure is complicated, but moderate use during childhood does not appear to put children at risk.

Sodium and salt are mistakenly thought to be the same ingredient. Actually, sodium is a mineral while salt is a naturally-occurring chemical compound made up of 40 percent sodium and 60 percent chloride. Salt is the major source of sodium in the diet.

The American Heart Association suggests people consume no more than 1,500 milligrams of sodium each day. That equals a little more than half a teaspoon. Most Americans 2 years old and up consume twice that amount—more than 3,400 milligrams a day.

Fortunately, you can make dietary changes that can help you reduce your risk for both diseases by reducing your sodium intake.
Reducing sodium can be difficult, because it is in so much more than just the salt we sprinkle onto our foods at the dinner table. About 75 percent of the sodium we consume is added to food during processing; it is used to lengthen the food’s shelf life and improve the texture. The CDC did a study to determine the major sources of sodium in the American diet. The following foods topped the list (in order): bread and rolls, cold cuts and cured meats, pizza, fresh and processed chicken and canned soups.

High amounts of sodium are also found in unexpected places including condiments, dairy products, chewing tobacco and snuff.

The National Institutes of Health suggests the following tips for reducing or cutting back on your sodium:

- Buy fresh, plain, frozen or canned vegetables labeled no salt added.
- Use fresh poultry, fish and lean meats rather than canned or processed.
- Season with herbs, spices and other salt-free seasonings instead of salt.
- Cook rice, pasta and hot cereal without added salt.
- Choose convenience foods that are lower in salt.
- Rinse canned foods that contain salt to remove some of the sodium.
- Purchase foods with low sodium, reduced sodium or no salt added when available.
- Choose ready-to-eat breakfast cereals that are lower in sodium.

By reading food labels at the grocery store, you can get an idea of the amount of sodium in individual foods. Focus particularly on the Percent Daily Value information on the nutrition label to see the percent of your daily allowance you’re getting from a serving of a particular food. This will help you compare products and make healthier choices.

Since salt does add flavor to foods, it may take you a week or two to get used to eating items with less or without salt.

For more information on improving your health, contact the Harlan County office of the UK Cooperative Extension Service. Educational programs of the Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, sex, religion, disability or national origin.