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IS BREAD THE SODIUM BAD GUY?

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By Richard Lobb, food writer from Fairfax, Va.

So, if you are worried about your blood pressure, you should stop eating bread because it is so high in sodium, right? That's the impression you get from the latest publicity blast from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about sources of sodium in the American diet.

CDC fingered bread and rolls as the biggest single source of sodium, saying they contribute 7.4 percent of the nation's sodium intake. That's funny – I like bread, especially the crusty kind, and I've never tasted a piece that I thought was salty. Do bakers really put a lot of salt in bread?

Well, no. The average slice of white bread has 137 milligrams of sodium; whole wheat, 134. Since the average daily allowance for sodium under government guidelines is 2,300 milligrams, that doesn't seem like a lot.

There's no question, Americans like salt and put a lot of it on their food. Health authorities have been warning us about this for years. (Other agencies have commented on the same study used by CDC but lacked CDC's well-known knack for publicity.) In our house, the dining table is dotted with salt shakers. I've had to take the salt away from my teenage son to keep his food from tasting like the Dead Sea. After years of salt ingestion, however, my blood pressure remains on the low side.

The real connection between salt and food is simply calories. We Americans eat hearty. We eat a lot. About two-

thirds of us are overweight or downright obese. There's salt in all our favorite foods, so we are ingesting more sodium as we eat more.

People are probably also looking for a little flavor kick. Americans actually prefer rather bland flavors – “beige food,” as it's called in the restaurant business. Chick-fil-A took a real chance when it brought out a spicy chicken sandwich (and more power to the company!). A similar offering at McDonald's flopped. People don't really like food with a lot of flavor other than sweet or salt. The salt shaker offers a quick flavor boost for most foods.

One thing that has changed is the rise of pizza. It's now a staple of the teenage diet. And it is the largest single contributor of sodium to any particular age group, clocking in at 461 milligrams a day for the 14-18 age group. Nothing else, in any age group, even comes close, according to the National Cancer Institute.

So take it with – dare I say – a grain of salt when CDC grumbles about your bread. After all, according to the federal government, Americans aren't eating enough whole-wheat bread. I guess we should look for low-sodium whole-wheat bread. I am not sure what the feds will propose to do about this, but I sense a salt tax in the future.

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