

WHAT IS SEA SALT ?

Salt has been used for centuries to preserve perishable foods and to enhance the taste of others. So precious was it in Roman times, that wages were paid in salt, the roman word for salt giving rise to our modern word, salary.

The principal constituent of salt is sodium, a mineral with greater nutritional value than is sometimes realised. The role of sodium in the body is to regulate the fluid content of all our tissues and organs. A deficiency is very rare under normal circumstances, but where the balance of sodium and potassium in the body is upset, ill-health can result. Sodium is easily lost by the body, and heavy sweating, for example, will cause a deficiency, marked by cramped and aching muscles.

Athletes and heavy manual workers often take salt as a preventative to cramp, since this is a simple combination of sodium and chlorine, and therefore an "instant" source of this first mineral.

However, many patients with impaired kidney function, heart and arterial disease are put on a salt-free diet, and it is thought that too much salt in the diet can actually cause high blood pressure. It is here that sea salt is thought to have the greatest advantage over ordinary salt.

Sea salt contains various other elements besides sodium chloride, and in a natural balance which helps it to be used efficiently by the body. Like sugar,

sodium chloride only becomes a threat to health when it is taken from its natural chemical compound and used in this concentrated form.

Sea salt has other factors in its favour as well. Its keener flavour means that you may have to use less to bring out the true taste of food; it complements rather than smothers other flavours. The gourmet will tell you that the difference between sea salt and ordinary salt is as marked as that between wine vinegar and malt vinegar.

The benefits to health of sea water have long been acknowledged and sea salt has similar benefits. It improves the appetite and digestion, and its rich balance of trace minerals makes up for any deficiencies which may result from eating devitalised food.

Because of the difficulty of finding uncontaminated sea water, sea salt is produced in relatively small quantities and is more expensive than ordinary salt to buy. Most brands are imported from the continent but Maldon and Tidman's sea salt are both produced in this country, the only survivors of an ancient tradition.

Any risk of contamination is eliminated by a filtering process before the sea water is evaporated. Fortnightly spring tides fill the storage tanks with the most concentrated saline water, but this can also contain solid particles and vegetable matter as well, all of which has to be removed before the water can be considered pure enough for salt production.

When all impurities are removed, the water is drawn off into shallow pans where it is evaporated to leave large crystals of salt. Most sea salts come to your table in crystalline form, though some are finely milled for use in a salt cellar. These are, however, free from the flowing agents which are added to ordinary table salts to improve keeping quality.

An ordinary table mill, similar to the kind used for grinding peppercorns, is the most convenient way of presenting crystals of sea salt at table.

Minerals in sea salt	
Substance	Dry evaporated Percentage
Sodium chloride	77.82
Magnesium chloride	9.44
Magnesium sulphate	6.57
Calcium sulphate	3.44
Potassium chloride	2.11
Magnesium bromide	0.22
Calcium carbonate	a trace