

The wherefore of salt appetite

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Sodium is a life-supporting cation, and many animals have evolved means for its acquisition and retention, respectively sodium appetite and kidneys. Humans share the retentive capacity, however, the determinants of our human excessive salt appetite, well over physiological need, are less well understood. Perinatal occurrences of putative sodium loss augment sodium intake later in life, and sodium loss in perspiration may increase and condition its attractiveness, but even in need states, increased intake of sodium seems to require experience, albeit there may be a predisposition for such learning. Irrespective of need, humans can learn to prefer a sodium-containing food, and while this may not generalize to other foods, mere exposure to high levels of dietary salt has been proposed to determine intake. These are meagre explanations for a phenomenon as potent, pervasive, and persistent as ingestion of salt worldwide, but they rely upon the assumption that we may have an innate preference for the taste of sodium, such as we have for sweet.

Surprisingly, increased avidity for the taste of salt does not seem to determine dietary intake. On the other hand, much, or most, of our sodium intake is untasted consciously, but may drive our dietary sodium intake. In sum, we have extensive knowledge of what high salt intake causes, but little of what causes high salt intake, a mismatch bedeviling effort to regulate our sodium intake. To redress the balance slightly, I shall present what is known about the determinants of excessive salt intake throughout the life-span.

Speaker Biography

Micah Leshem completed his PhD at Leeds University, USA. He is professor of psychology at the University of Haifa, Israel, where he has his laboratory. He has collaborated with colleagues in Europe, Brazil, and the USA, and has over 70 publications on mineral appetites, transgenerational effects, and ingestive behaviour, that have been cited over 2000 times, H-index =25 (Google), and has served on national boards and parliamentary advisory committees.

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