

# The Great Salt Debate: Is Your "Healthy" Salt Actually Hurting You?

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For decades, the blue-and-white salt shaker was a permanent fixture on every Indian dining table. It was simple, reliable, and inexpensive. But walk down the grocery aisle today, and you are met with an overwhelming array of choices: Himalayan Pink Salt, Black Salt (Kala Namak), Celtic Sea Salt, and Raw Rock Salt.

Marketed with buzzwords like "all-natural," "ancient," and "mineral-rich," these specialty salts often cost ten times more than standard table salt. But as we swap our fortified table salt for these trendy alternatives, are we inadvertently trading away our family's health for a marketing gimmick?

Salt (sodium chloride) has long been one of the key essential commodities in the world. Globally, salt has played various important roles throughout human history. It has even served as a form of currency – often referred to as white gold. While salt has many industrial uses, we primarily consider how it is used in food. Since ancient times, salt has been used to preserve and flavour foods. In India, specifically, salt holds a significant position from the perspective of politics, culture and public health. This article dives deep into the science of sodium, the history of iodine, and the myth-busting truth about why your humble iodized salt remains the undisputed champion of the kitchen.

## The Dandi Legacy: Salt as a National Pulse

In India, salt is never just a chemical compound (NaCl). It is a symbol of sovereignty. In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi's 385 km march to Dandi was a protest against the British salt tax—a tax on a basic human necessity.

Fast forward to the 1950s and 60s, and salt took on a new role: a public health vehicle. In regions like the Kangra Valley, thousands of people suffered from "Endemic Goiter"—a massive swelling of the thyroid gland—and high rates of cretinism (physical and mental disability in children). The culprit was a lack of iodine in the soil.

Because every person, regardless of their economic status, consumes roughly the same amount of salt daily, the government realized that adding a tiny amount of iodine to salt could solve a nationwide health crisis. By 1997, the sale of non-iodized salt for human consumption was banned in India. This single move is hailed by the World Health Organization (WHO) as one of the most successful public health interventions in history.

## The Rise of the "Pink Myth": Himalayan Salt vs. Iodized Salt

The most popular challenger to table salt today is Himalayan Pink Salt. Harvested primarily from the Khewra

Salt Mine in Pakistan, its beautiful rosy hue is often cited as evidence of its "purity" and "superior mineral content."



Fig. 1. From Dandi to the dinner table: Evolving the Indian salt path

## The Mineral Argument: Fact or Fiction?

Promoters claim pink salt contains 84 different trace minerals, including magnesium, calcium, and potassium. While this is technically true, the *concentration* of these minerals is negligible.

- **The Reality:** To get your daily requirement of magnesium from pink salt, you would have to consume nearly 500 grams (half a kilogram) of salt a day. At that point, the massive sodium overdose would be fatal long before the minerals provided any benefit.
- **The "Purity" Paradox:** The very things that give pink salt its color—iron oxide (rust) and other impurities—are exactly what are refined out of table salt to make it pure.

## The Iodine Gap: A Dangerous Trade-off

The most significant danger of switching entirely to pink or black salt is the loss of iodine. Natural rock salts and sea salts contain only trace amounts of iodine (often less than 2 mcg per gram), whereas iodized salt is standardized to provide roughly 150 mcg of iodine per day in just one teaspoon.

**Why does this matter?** Iodine is the fuel for your thyroid gland. Without it, your metabolism slows down, leading to weight gain, fatigue, and depression. More critically, iodine is essential for the brain development of a fetus. If a pregnant woman switches to non-iodized pink salt, she risks lowering her child's IQ and cognitive potential.

## Black Salt (Kala Namak): The Digestive Darling

In Indian households, Black Salt is a digestive staple. Used in *chaats*, *lassis*, and *churans*, it has a distinct sulfuric aroma.

- **Evidence of Superiority?** Many believe Kala Namak is "cooling" and better for acidity. While it may contain small amounts of greigite (iron sulfide) which can act as a mild laxative, there is no scientific evidence that it is healthier for the heart or blood pressure than regular salt.
- **The Sodium Trap:** Many people believe they can eat more black salt because it is "herbal." In reality, it is still mostly sodium chloride. Overconsumption leads to the same hypertension risks as any other salt.

**Does Science Support Trendy Salts?**

A common question arises: *Is there any evidence that pink or black salt is better than iodized salt?*

**The short answer is No.** Extensive peer-reviewed research, including studies published in the *Indian Journal of Medical Research* and the *Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, consistently shows that:

1. **Sodium is Sodium:** Whether it is \$1,000\$ meters deep in the Himalayas or evaporated from the Arabian Sea, the sodium content is almost identical (about 38-40%). Your blood pressure does not care if the salt was pink or white; it only reacts to the sodium.
2. **Bioavailability:** The minerals in raw salts are often in a form that the human body cannot easily absorb compared to minerals from vegetables, fruits, and dairy.
3. **The Iodine Protection:** There is zero evidence that non-iodized specialty salts can protect against the thyroid disorders that iodized salt effectively prevents.

**The Real Crisis: The Quantity, Not the Color**

While we debate pink vs. white, the real "silent killer" in the Indian kitchen is the volume of salt we consume.

The WHO recommends less than 5 grams of salt per day. However, studies across Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu show that Indians consume between 8 and 11 grams daily.

**Why are we eating so much?**

- **The "Hidden" Salt:** It's not just what you sprinkle on top. It's the salt in your pickles (*achaar*), papads, biscuits, and bread.

- **Home Cooking:** In India, the primary source of salt (nearly 65-70%) is added during the cooking process. Unlike the West, where processed food is the main culprit, our "ghar ka khana" is often very high in sodium.

**Practical Steps: How to Salt Your Way to Health**

You don't have to throw away your pink salt—just use it wisely. Here is a balanced approach:

1. **The "80/20" Rule:** Use iodized table salt for your main cooking (daals, sabzis, and dough) to ensure your family gets their mandatory iodine. Use pink or black salt sparingly as a "finishing salt" for flavor or on fruits.
2. **Measure, Don't Pour:** Avoid pouring salt directly from the container. Use a standardized 5ml teaspoon to track how much salt goes into a family meal.
3. **The Low-Sodium Alternative:** If you have high blood pressure, consider Low-Sodium Salt (LSS). These salts replace some sodium with potassium. According to the *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, LSS can significantly reduce the risk of stroke and heart attack. (*Note: Consult a doctor if you have kidney issues before switching to LSS.*)
4. **Harness the Power of Spices:** India is the land of spices! Use more garlic, ginger, lemon, and tamarind. These provide "sour" and "umami" notes that satisfy the palate with much less salt.

**The Final Verdict**

If you are choosing pink salt because you like the taste or the aesthetic, that is a culinary choice. But if you are choosing it because you think it is "healthier," the science suggests otherwise. Iodized salt is a hard-won victory for Indian public health. It protects our children's intelligence and our adults' thyroid health. In the battle of the salts, the humble, fortified white salt remains the safest, most scientifically backed choice for the general masses.

**The Salt Showdown: Nutrition vs. Myth**

This table compares a standard level teaspoon (5g) of different types of salt, revealing that despite marketing claims, the sodium content remains nearly identical across the board.

Nutritional Component (per 5g teaspoon)	Standard Table Salt	Iodized	Himalayan Salt	Pink	Black Salt (Kala Namak)	WHO Recommendation (Max)	Daily
Sodium Content	~1950 mg		~1900 mg		~1920 mg	<2000 mg	
Iodine Content	High & Standardized (~150 mcg)		Trace/Negligible (<10 mcg)		Trace/Negligible (<5 mcg)	150 mcg (Adults)	
Trace Minerals (Mg, Ca, K)	Refined Out		Trace Amounts*		Trace Amounts (Sulfides)	Varies by mineral	
Primary Health Benefit	Prevents Goiter & Protects Fetal Brain Development		None (Culinary use only)		Mild Digestive Aid (greigite)	N/A	
Verdict	The Healthy Essential		Culinary Luxury		Flavor Enhancer	N/A	

*\*Note: While Himalayan salt contains 84 trace minerals, their concentration is too low to provide any nutritional benefit at safe consumption levels*

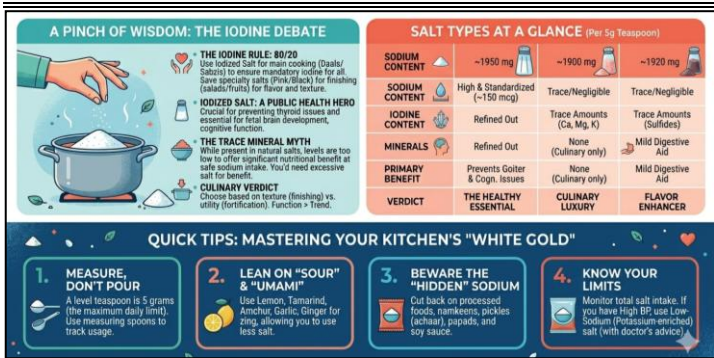


Fig. 2. Navigating your way to a healthier heart

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