The No-Salt Journey

Don and Maureen Gazzaniga
Congestive heart failure is the No. 1 reason older patients are hospitalized, according to a review of Medicare records, says James Rohack, M.D., who is president-elect of the American Medical Association.

A congestive heart failure survivor becomes a no-salt cooking guru and proves you don’t have to sacrifice flavor to cut salt. He shares his journey to better health and his favorite low-sodium recipes.

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WHEN TOLD HE MIGHT NOT LIVE the year out, Don Gazzaniga started cooking.

Diagnosed with congestive heart failure, Gazzaniga was told he probably would need a heart transplant and should drastically cut salt from his diet. So the amateur chef set out to do what experts said at the time was impossible—eat well on half a gram or less of sodium a day, which is less than a quarter of a teaspoon of table salt.

That was 12 years ago.

Today, the 75-year-old from Auburn, California, is thriving without a heart transplant. He has written four no-salt, low-sodium cookbooks and has built a large virtual community on his megaheart.com Web site.

The former film director, cinematographer, and TV ad writer gets 10–20 e-mails a day from people who say his cookbooks and low-sodium recipes helped save their lives. Quite likely, they helped save Gazzaniga’s life, too.

Getting the news

Looking back, Gazzaniga says he had signs of congestive heart failure (including dizziness and shortness of breath) for a few years before he was diagnosed. Then one day while he was out on the lake with his competitive rowing team, his energy level suddenly dropped to zero. Although he told himself he was simply worn out, a cardiologist quickly discovered heart failure.

Gazzaniga sought the opinions of other doctors and ultimately came under the care of Michael Fowler, F.R.C.P., a cardiologist and >>

Sodium’s critical role in chronic heart failure

Reducing and controlling sodium consumption is a key element of the treatment regimen for heart failure.

“A low-sodium diet is the foundation on which we build the rest of the congestive heart failure patient’s multidrug treatment regime,” says Gazzaniga’s cardiologist, Michael Fowler, F.R.C.P., director of the Heart Failure Program and Cardiomyopathy Center at Stanford School of Medicine in California. The diet may help the patient:

• **Feel better.** If you follow a low-sodium diet daily, it can help reduce fluid retention and thus minimize the symptoms of congestive heart failure, including shortness of breath and ankle swelling.

• **Decrease diuretics.** “Diuretics (water pills commonly prescribed for heart failure) can’t work well if you have unrestricted sodium intake,” Fowler says. “Most of my patients who closely follow a sodium-restricted diet are able to take a lower diuretic dosage, and some are able to discontinue diuretics altogether. There is an association between lower diuretic dosage and longer survival.”

• **Optimize dosage of other drugs.** For example, patients often can take lower doses of other medicines (such as ACE inhibitors and beta blockers) if they aren’t struggling with fluid retention prompted by sodium.

Heart failure patients who reduce their sodium intake should always do it under a doctor’s supervision so that their diuretic dosage can be adjusted proportionately.
“I get a lot of letters from heart failure survivors who have been able to get off the heart transplant lists by staying compliant with their treatment program, including a low-sodium diet, medication, and exercise,” Gazzaniga says.

Thriving with chronic heart failure

A diagnosis of heart failure is not a death sentence. “Stay active. Don’t give up. Your life isn’t over,” Don Gazzaniga says. (For more about living well with heart failure, see “House Call” on page 18.) Here is how Gazzaniga lives his life to the fullest:

• **Food records:** When Gazzaniga started his low-sodium diet, he recorded his sodium intake daily. Today, he can track it in his head and has memorized the sodium content of many foods.

• **Mental exercise:** Since his diagnosis, Gazzaniga has learned to build Web sites, taught himself to play the saxophone, taken up oil painting, and written several novels.

Committing to the diet

An optimistic man determined to beat his diagnosis, Gazzaniga diligently cut his sodium intake to 500 milligrams or less per day (which many experts said at the time would be too hard to do). Fowler adjusted Gazzaniga’s diuretic (water pill) dosage based on his low-sodium intake.

“You can’t cheat on the diet, eating 500 mg of sodium one day and 2,500 mg the next. Your sodium intake has to be steady so the doctor can regulate your medicine,” he says. Gazzaniga’s compliance became evident within a year and a half of his initial diagnosis. His heart, previously enlarged from congestive heart failure, had reshaped to its normal size. He no longer needed a heart transplant. Two years after his diagnosis, Gazzaniga was able to discontinue his diuretic. He continues to take other medications for heart failure and had a pacemaker implanted to regulate his heart.

A big reason Gazzaniga has been able to stick to his diet for more than a decade is his creativity in the kitchen. “It wasn’t easy in the beginning,” he recalls. “But when you stop eating salt, your palate gradually recovers, and you’re able to detect the real taste of food within 2 to 3 months.” In the following pages, Gazzaniga shares some of his favorite recipes, tips, and a few dashes of optimism.
Readers

Based on years of e-mails he’s received from readers, Gazzaniga says the biggest obstacle for many people is getting family and spouse support. “It is very important that families understand that those with heart failure need help after diagnosis,” he says.

Cooking with the Gazzanigas

Writing four low-sodium cookbooks was a family affair for the Gazzanigas.

Don’s wife, Maureen, contributed recipes in two of the books, and his daughter Jeannie Gazzaniga-Moloo, Ph.D., a registered dietitian and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, wrote a 28-day meal plan in The No-Salt Lowest-Sodium Cookbook (St. Martin’s Press, 2002), using the book’s recipes. That book is now in its ninth printing, which is remarkable because Gazzaniga says many publishers turned it down because it was the first of its kind.

Gazzaniga-Moloo, of Roseville, California, has had nutrition clients bring in her father’s low-sodium cookbooks—not realizing that her father wrote them—and express how tasty and easy the recipes are and how much the megaheart.com community has helped them. “Patients are floored—and so impressed—when they find out Don is my father,” she says.

The cookbooks were written for people with congestive heart failure, but Gazzaniga-Moloo says the books can be helpful to anyone limiting sodium intake.

The government’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans advises that healthy adults limit sodium to 2,300 milligrams a day, and those older than 50 stay under 1,500 milligrams. Both of those limits are higher than some heart failure patients follow.

Gazzaniga-Moloo recommends that people work with a registered dietitian to make the diet changes. For more information about the cookbooks, visit megaheart.com.

• Physical exercise: “Just getting up [out of bed] was exercise when I was first diagnosed,” Gazzaniga says. But slowly he began to walk short distances, gradually working up to 2–3 miles a day. He also can play an occasional game of football or basketball with his grandsons.

• Family support: Gazzaniga’s wife and five children have encouraged him since his diagnosis. He believes that had he not followed his treatment program, he might not have lived to meet 11 of his 13 grandchildren.

• Diet: Gazzaniga limits not just sodium but saturated fat and cholesterol. He says the best place to shop for low-sodium, low-fat foods is the produce aisle.

• Medication: Gazzaniga makes sure he takes his heart failure medications by keeping the pills in a daily organizer. He also stores a spare set in the glove compartment of his car.

(Clockwise from upper left) Don Gazzaniga at home; shooting hoops with his grandchildren; walking with grandsons (from far left) Justin, David, and Josh, granddaughter Gabriella, wife Maureen, and granddaughter Sarah; cooking with Sarah; organizing his pills; and jamming with David and Gabriella.
Season with herbs and spices rather than salt substitutes; they are often high in potassium, which interacts with certain heart medications.

**Mock Pork Sausage**

*(above left) Prep: 25 minutes | Cook: 8 minutes*  
Makes 6 servings | Serving size: 2-ounce patty

- 12 ounces lean ground turkey  
- 3 ounces ground pork  
- 1 teaspoon dried sage  
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin seed, lightly toasted  
- 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder*  
- 1/2 teaspoon onion powder*  
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper  
- 1/4 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes  
- 1/4 teaspoon dried oregano  
- 1/4 teaspoon dried tarragon  
- Nonstick olive oil spray

1. Combine all of the ingredients except olive oil spray in a large bowl. Form the mixture into six 3- to 4-inch-diameter patties. Lightly coat a 12-inch nonstick skillet with nonstick spray and heat the pan over medium heat. Brown the patties on both sides about 4 minutes per side or until cooked through. Serve hot.  
* You can substitute 4 minced fresh garlic cloves and 1/3 cup finely diced yellow onion for the garlic and onion powders.

**Per sausage patty:** 126 cal., 8 g total fat (2 g sat. fat), 55 mg chol., 62 mg sodium, 1 g carb., 0 g fiber, 12 g pro.

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**Potato Salad**

*(above, far left) Prep: 30 minutes | Cook: 20 minutes*  
Makes 8 servings | Serving size: 1/2 cup

- 3 medium white, red, or Yukon gold potatoes (1 pound), rinsed, scrubbed but not peeled  
- 1 tablespoon olive oil  
- 1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar  
- 1 clove garlic, minced  
- 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper  
- 2 large hard-boiled eggs, chopped  
- 1/2 cup light dairy sour cream*  
- 1/2 cup chopped celery  
- 1/2 cup chopped sweet onion

1. In a medium saucepan, place unpeeled potatoes in enough water to cover. Bring to boiling; reduce heat. Simmer, covered, for 20 to 25 minutes or just until tender. Drain well; cool slightly. Cut the potatoes into 1-inch cubes.  
2. Meanwhile, in medium bowl, whisk together olive oil, vinegar, garlic, and black pepper. Fold in eggs, sour cream, celery, and onion. Add the potatoes. Toss lightly to coat.  
* Choose sour cream with no more than 25 mg of sodium per 2 tablespoons.

**Per 1/2 cup:** 91 cal., 4 g total fat (1 g sat. fat), 57 mg chol., 32 mg sodium, 10 g carb., 1 g fiber, 3 g pro.

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**Don’s Cooking Tip:** Go slowly when modifying a recipe or adding something new. Keep careful notes about the changes you’ve made so you can repeat them if they improve the end product.
Meat often is brined, which adds salt. Check the labels or speak with the butcher at your supermarket. When dining out, be sure to ask the server about added salt in meat.
Chocolate Cookie Treats

Prep: 45 minutes | Bake: 10 minutes per batch
Cool: 1 hour | Chill: 1 hour | Oven: 350°F
Makes 30 (2-inch) cookies

1 ounce sweet baking, bittersweet, or semisweet chocolate, melted and cooled slightly
5 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
1 cup white granulated sugar
1 large egg
1 egg yolk
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 1/3 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 cup unsalted walnuts, finely chopped
30 walnut halves
Chocolate Glaze (see recipe, right)
Powdered sugar (optional)

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. While chocolate cools, beat butter in a medium bowl on medium-high speed 2 minutes or until smooth. Add granulated sugar, beating until creamy.

2. Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Place on cookie sheets lined with parchment paper. Press a walnut half into top of each cookie. Bake for 10 to 12 minutes or until edges are lightly browned. Remove from pan and cool completely on a wire rack.

3. Spoon Chocolate Glaze evenly over cooled cookies. Let stand until glaze is set. Dust with powdered sugar, if desired. Store the cookies in an airtight container between layers of waxed paper for up to 1 week or freeze for up to 1 month.

Chocolate Glaze: Melt 1 ounce sweet baking, bittersweet, or semisweet chocolate and 1 tablespoon unsalted butter in a small saucepan. Remove from heat. Add 1/4 teaspoon vanilla, 1 cup powdered sugar, and 2 tablespoons nonfat milk and blend well.

Per 2-inch cookie: 118 cal., 5 g total fat (2 g sat. fat), 20 mg chol., 4 mg sodium, 17 g carb., 1 g fiber, 2 g pro.
**Flavor Enhancer**

Start to finish: 5 minutes  
Makes 13 ½ tablespoons

- 5 tablespoons unsalted onion powder
- 3 ½ tablespoons unsalted garlic powder
- 2 tablespoons dry mustard
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1 tablespoon ground thyme
- 2 teaspoons celery seed
- 1 teaspoon ground white pepper
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves

1. In a small airtight container, combine all ingredients. Store in a cool dry place up to 6 months. Taste before storing. If you want one of the flavors above to be increased, add ¼ teaspoon at a time and shake well before tasting again.  

**Tip:** For an additional flavor boost, add a little dried dillweed and/or finely shredded lemon peel to a small amount of the spice mix that you will use right away. Do not add lemon peel to the mix that you plan to store.

Per ¼ teaspoon: 4 cal., 0 g total fat (0 g sat. fat), 0 mg chol., 0 g sodium, 1 g carb., 0 g fiber, 0 g pro.

**Sweet Chocolate Mix**

Start to finish: 5 minutes  
Makes 3 ½ cups  
Serving size: 1 tablespoon

- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 1 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 cup miniature semisweet chocolate chips
- 2 teaspoons powdered vanilla (optional)

1. Combine sugar, cocoa powder, chocolate chips, and, if desired, vanilla in a large bowl. Store mixture in a cool dry place up to 2 months.  

2. Make a delicious hot chocolate drink using 2 or 3 tablespoons per cup of warm nonfat milk.

Per tablespoon: 54 cal., 1 g total fat (1 g sat. fat), 0 mg chol., 3 mg sodium, 11 g carb., 0 g fiber, 1 g pro.

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**Don’s Cooking Tip:** if you make your own low-sodium bread (which typically has a short shelf life), freeze a few slices in a zipper-lock bag. When you’re ready to eat it, just take it out of the freezer and let it thaw a few hours on the countertop. (Microwaving it can dry it out.)