

What is the effect of chloride in hydroponics?

I recently wrote [a post](#) about the effect of sodium ions in hydroponics and how it is important to keep an eye on sodium levels due to the potentially negative effects they can have on plants. However you may have noticed that sodium is never added alone into nutrient solutions and there is always a counter-ion that accompanies sodium, which is – more often than not – chloride. This ion is very special and it has some clear effects in hydroponic culture. Today we are going to be talking about chloride, how it can dramatically affect plants and why it does so in such a special way.

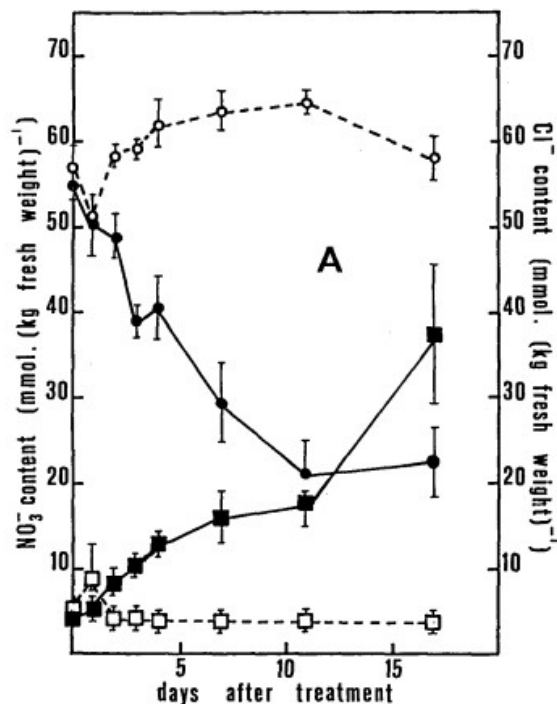


FIG. 3A: Effect of substituting chloride for nitrate in the nutrient solution on the nitrate content (●) and the chloride content (■) in leaf blades of lettuce plants, compared with the nitrate (○) and chloride content (□) of untreated plants. Light intensity: 65 W.m⁻², temperature 17°C and rel. humidity 70%. All values are averages of 3 determinations. Vertical bars indicate ± 1 SE of the mean.

Chloride – not to be confused with chlorine – is a reduced form of the element Cl, an ion with negative charge (Cl⁻). Unlike elemental chlorine, which is a strong oxidant, chloride is extremely inert in terms of its chemical reactivity and does not appreciably react with anything in a hydroponic nutrient solution. This however does not mean that it is inert when you put it in contact with plants, as a matter of fact chloride is a micro-nutrient – essential for plant life – but it plays such a small role that any important increase in concentration can be detrimental. Usually there is no need to add chloride but simply the chloride present in the water – or as impurities within the other salts – will be more than enough.

But what effect does chloride have? Chloride is special in that it behaves chemically in a similar way to ammonium when in contact with plants, that is, chloride can go through plant cells very easily. This means that whatever chloride you put in solution is very readily absorbed, meaning that it counteracts the absorption of other anions very strongly. This is why the expected effect of plants dropping a solution's pH due to the addition of ammonium is completely negated if instead of ammonium sulfate you add ammonium chloride. This is because you add both an anion and a cation that are absorbed very fast, hence you do not affect the cation/anion absorption balance of the plant and the pH will continue to drop or increase in exactly the same manner as before.

This anion absorption of chloride implies that it readily competes with anion absorption. This means that if you have chloride and nitrate in solution plants will tend to absorb the chloride instead of the nitrate and you will see symptoms of nitrogen deficiency – not because you don't have enough in solution – but because nitrogen absorption is being hindered by the presence of a very competitive anion. Not only this but other anions, particularly phosphates, will also suffer and therefore you will also start seeing problems with P

absorption as well. If you're interested in reading more about this I recommend [this chloride replacement study](#) showing the dramatic effect it has on nutrient absorption.

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In many cases, deficiency problems in salinity studies can be attributed to the action of chloride and not so much the direct action of sodium ions. See [here](#) for a study that does a direct comparison on seedlings. However since sodium and chloride are very often present in equimolar ratios it is important to always search for both to know what type of problems you are dealing with. Chloride can cause problems at much lower concentrations than sodium, with just chloride concentrations above 20-30 ppm already causing very substantial issues for a wide variety of plants. If you have chloride it is wise to consider this when gauging the concentration of the other anions in solution as their concentration will need to be increased to account for the presence of this ion.

As in the case of sodium there is not much you can do to decrease the amount of this ion in solution since almost all chlorides are soluble. Some zeolites – like [clinoptilolite](#) – might be able to remove some of these ions from solution but the most effective method if your water contains an important concentration of chloride is to use a reverse osmosis machine.

If this is not possible – due to costs or water availability – then the best chance you have is to try to increase anion concentrations to try to compensate for chloride absorption. However this will not work if the Cl concentration is very high as the osmotic pressure will be too high for the plants to handle after compensating.

Some things you should know about sodium in hydroponics

Sodium is a ubiquitous element, you can find it in your tap water, in the sea and in most eatable foods. It is also necessary for animal life where it plays a key role in many biological processes. However – despite its overwhelming abundance – sodium is in fact not required for plant life in general (although some species, like C4 plants, do require it in small measure), meaning that it can act in a detrimental manner when present in significant quantities in hydroponic culture. Today I want to talk about what problems sodium can cause, how they can be attenuated and how we can deal with it in hydroponic crops.

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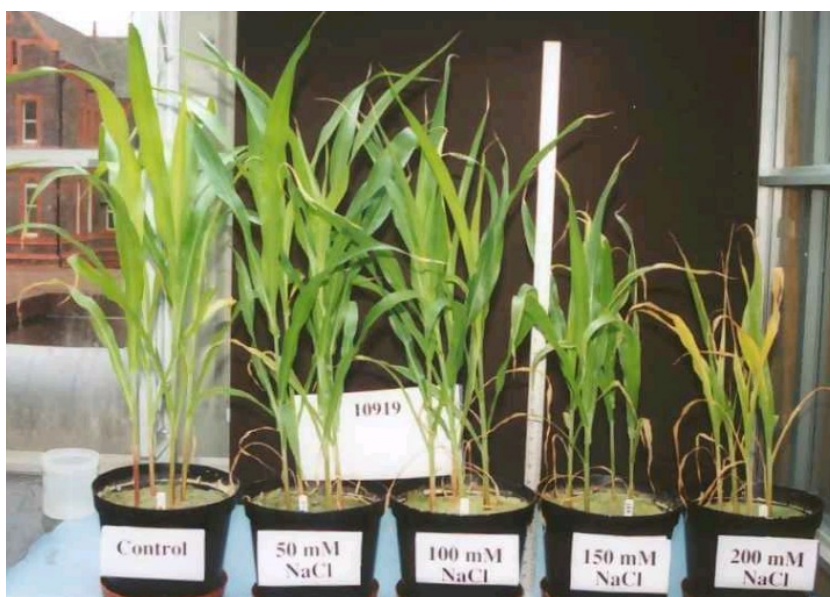
So what is the problem with sodium? Sodium in its cation form (Na^+) is an extremely soluble ion with an ionic radius that is intermediate between those of lithium and potassium. Being from the same group it chemically behaves in a similar way to these two elements and can therefore act in a similar manner when in contact with plants. Sodium – when present in large enough quantities – will enter plants in significant quantities and replace potassium in some biological roles. Although this might work in your favor when potassium is scarce it does not replace it very well and ultimately costs you dearly in terms of plant growth when compared to plants grown without sodium. You can read [this 1976 review](#) for some good information about some general effects of sodium on plants.

Since sodium is so ever-present it is a significant concern in agriculture. This is a reason why there are so many salinity studies – which is what the abundance of salts like sodium chloride is usually called – often aimed at finding ways to attenuate the effects of sodium to make plants grow effectively under high salinity conditions. This is not because people will add things like table salt to agricultural crops but because many areas around the world simply don't have a choice and need to deal with higher salinity

conditions. Things like additives, substrates, irrigation cycles and light treatments are investigated to figure out how they affect plant behavior under these conditions. For example [this recent study](#) sought to find out if silica nano-particles could help with this problem (and they do!).

In your hydroponic crop sodium might be an important concern in two main ways. The first is if your water source contains a significant amount of sodium. In general sodium starts to be worrisome above 5 mM which is around 120 ppm which is the point where it can start to significantly affect yields and growth. However sodium even at 12 ppm can start having some micro-nutrient like effects, but these can be mostly beneficial in flowering plants like tomatoes and peppers, even increasing fruit quality when given in moderation (see [here](#)). However many plants are resistant to even moderate levels of sodium if these are not kept for too long so if your source water has something like 20-60 ppm of sodium (common in the US), you shouldn't really worry too much about it. In reality huge problems usually start at around 75mM of NaCl which is closer to 1725ppm of Na, although with some Na sensitive crops this might be much lower (like lettuce where 100ppm is already very detrimental to growth).

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The second problem you might face only happens if you have a system that recirculates nutrient solution. Since sodium is not absorbed so readily by plants it can easily accumulate in a nutrient solution that is recirculated for a significant period of time. During one month of operation a 1 gallon per plant deep water culture system can increase the concentration from tap water 5 fold. This presents a problem since this implies that a hydroponic system that initially had 50 ppm of Na can easily end up with 250 after a single month of solution recirculation. This poses a limit to the life of a nutrient solution, even if other nutrient concentrations are adequately controlled through routine lab analysis. This means that if you want to keep solutions for longer than a few weeks you probably need to use reverse-osmosis water to avoid this problem – although more about the issue of solution life in a future post.

In the end sodium is an element that might be good to have in small measure in most cases, if you are growing C4 plants – like maize or sugar cane – then it is essential in a small amount (20-60 ppm) but you will want to avoid having sodium in any bigger amount or it can start to affect your growth. For plants where sodium isn't biologically necessary it can still provide some useful supplemental roles but in this case it might be best to keep it close to micro-nutrient levels, at 5-15 ppm. However if you are growing a halophilic plant – like say swiss chard – then you might want to have even more than 1000ppm of sodium to increase your growth (see [here](#)).