

Potassium: What If I Have Too Much or Not Enough?

What is potassium?

Potassium is a mineral that helps the cells in your body work correctly. Foods with a lot of potassium include bananas, potatoes, yams, dried apricots, almonds, avocados, coconut water, soybeans, and bran. You can get potassium from eating most fruits, vegetables, meats, and fish.

What can cause potassium to be too low?

You can lose too much potassium in the urine or stool. This can happen by taking certain medicines, such as diuretics (“water pills” to treat high blood pressure), or if you have diarrhea. Some people don’t get enough potassium in their diets, but this is rare.

What can cause potassium to be too high?

Certain medicines can cause high potassium. Some examples are angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors; angiotensin receptor blockers (ARBs), which are used to treat

high blood pressure; and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen and naproxen. Kidney problems may also cause you to have too much potassium.

How do I know if I have potassium problems?

Your doctor can measure potassium with a blood test. Sometimes other tests are used to help find the cause of the problem.

How are potassium problems treated?

If a medicine is causing it, your doctor may tell you to stop taking it or to take a different one. For low potassium, you may need to take potassium supplements. If potassium is too high, your doctor may give you medicine to help the body get rid of extra potassium.

When your potassium level is very high or very low, you might need to stay in the hospital so that doctors can give you intravenous medicine and monitor your heart.

September 2015

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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