High potassium (hyperkalemia) [1]

Dear Alice,

I would like to know what you would do when your potassium level is high. And what could cause this? Please let me know.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Potassium is a mineral that's needed for bodily functions such as nerve function and muscle contraction. Potassium also helps the body move nutrients into and waste out of cells. While it’s necessary to have potassium for the body to function, it’s possible to have too much of a good thing. Hyperkalemia, also known as high potassium or hyperpotassemia, is a condition resulting from abnormally high levels of potassium in the blood, which can be cause health risks and be potentially life threatening. If you're concerned you may be experiencing this, it's highly recommended that you speak with your health care provider as soon as possible. Fortunately, there are treatments which range from changes in diet to kidney dialysis. Read on for information about the causes and treatment options.

Potassium is used to help carry electrical signals throughout the body. As such, it plays a critical role in the functioning of the heart muscle cells. Too much potassium, however, can lead to muscle fatigue, weakness, paralysis, abnormal heart rhythms, and nausea. There are a number of potential causes of hyperkalemia. A person is at higher risk if they have too much potassium in their diet (such as from using salt substitutes [2]), use certain blood pressure medications such as angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors, or have conditions such as kidney disease or Addison disease. Part of the role of kidneys is to maintain the potassium levels in the body, often removing excess through urine. However, if a person’s kidneys fail to work properly, it may lead to hyperkalemia.

There are a number of treatment plans for hyperkalemia, though it’s worth mentioning that treatment varies depending on the causes of the condition, severity of symptoms, and how the condition is affecting organs within the body. When working with a health care provider, they may recommend one or more of the following treatments:
- Maintaining a low-potassium diet (this is generally only used in mild cases)
- Stopping any use of medications that increase blood potassium levels
- Reducing or stopping potassium supplements
- Using water pills or diuretics to help the body remove potassium through urine
- Administering glucose and insulin intravenously
- Administering calcium intravenously
- Taking medications that remove potassium from the intestines before it’s absorbed
- Dialysis treatments, particularly if the individual’s kidney function is poor

_List adapted from [Mount Sinai](http://www.mountsinai.org)._

If hyperkalemia is suspected, it’s critical that you speak with your health care provider as this condition isn’t always detected on its own. It’s usually diagnosed when treating other conditions. If you’re concerned that you may have hyperkalemia, your health care provider will likely order a blood test to diagnose and recommend an appropriate treatment plan. It’s great that you’re asking the questions to learn more about this key nutrient and what might happen when there’s too much in the body!

Alice!

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