

Don't Underestimate the Power of Potassium

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A mineral that helps maintain a balance between the chemical and electrical processes in your body, a healthy amount of potassium in your body is crucial not just to health, but to life
- Potassium helps your muscles contract, regulates your body fluids, balances low blood sugar, transmits nerve impulses and lowers blood pressure, as well as your risk of stroke and heart disease
- The Institute of Medicine recommends 4,700 milligrams of potassium per day, but most people in the U.S. actually ingest half that amount
- Studies indicate that most people who take potassium supplements or medications would be far healthier if they derived their potassium from foods

By Dr. Mercola

While it may seem like just another compound among thousands, potassium is a mineral with innumerable advantages to keep your body functioning. Found in almost every natural food, especially green leafy ones, potassium is considered a major mineral that is required in somewhat large amounts.

Fact: according to one survey, only about 5 percent of the U.S. population consumes enough fruits and vegetables to receive the right amount of [potassium](#). The Institute of Medicine's recommendation for adequate potassium is 4,700 milligrams (mg) per day.

However, the average reported intake for people 2 years and older was 2,640 mg per day, a number that hasn't changed much in the last 20 years.¹

The problem is that many people in the U.S. today maintain diets that make little room for keeping up their potassium levels. When a daily doughnut or a bowl of cereal is considered breakfast, and a pile of fries and an energy drink is a person's idea of a good lunch, things start breaking down rather quickly.

The upshot is, maintaining the [optimum levels of potassium](#) is crucial not just to health, but to life. If those levels are out of balance, vital functions are adversely affected, so it's a good thing this mineral is present, to varying degrees, in so many different types of foods.

Ways Potassium Maintains Your Health, While a Deficiency Doesn't

Potassium is an electrolyte, which, as its name suggests, helps conduct electrical charges in your body, along with other electrolytes such as calcium, [magnesium](#), [sodium](#) and chloride. Eating potassium-rich foods is important to help maintain a balance between the chemical and electrical processes in your body.

The main benefits realized by eating foods containing this mineral are somewhat interrelated. Among other things, potassium:

- Helps your muscles contract, including your heart muscle. Because potassium helps your heart beat regularly, problems with an [irregular heartbeat](#) may be stabilized by eating more foods containing this mineral.

Studies indicate that higher potassium intake is linked to lower risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease²

- Regulates the fluids in your body and, along with them, your electrolyte balance³

- Transmits nerve impulses. One review revealed that maintaining the stability between potassium and sodium releases nerve impulses; a "differential" compromises the system and leads to diseases and physiological imbalances⁴

- Improves [blood pressure](#). In another study, more than 80 percent of people on hypertension medication were able to cut their doses in half just by increasing their dietary intake of potassium⁵

- Balances low blood sugar. A decrease in potassium can trigger a plunge in blood sugar, causing trembling, sweating, weakness and confusion. Potassium intake can provide almost instantaneous relief⁶

Conversely, potassium intake that is too low compromises your bone strength and nervous system function, and contributes to conditions like [kidney stones](#) and high blood pressure and:

| | | |
|-----------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Muscle weakness | Fatigue | Constipation |
| Irritability | Abdominal pain | Cramps |
| Drowsiness | Confusion | Abnormal heartbeat |
| Paralysis | | |

What Has Potassium Done for You Lately?

Here's one way normalizing your potassium levels plays out within your body: with a deficiency, your blood pressure rises; when you begin to eat the right amount of foods containing high levels of potassium, it tends to lower.

In a chain of events that's fairly simple, when you eat the right vegetables, your cholesterol level tends to drop and with it your risk of developing heart disease. According to an article in The Epoch Times:⁷

"Excess dietary sodium is linked with high blood pressure in some people, whose kidneys are unable to process sodium as efficiently as others. As a result, a diet that is relatively high in potassium and low in sodium is linked with a lower risk of developing hypertension and of experiencing a stroke."

Additionally, a study by Harvard School of Public Health researchers reported that increasing the intake of potassium lowers your [stroke](#) risk.⁸

*"A prospective study of more than 43,000 men followed for eight years found that men in the top quintile (1/5) of dietary potassium intake (median intake, 4,300 mg/day) were only 62 percent as likely to have a stroke than those in the lowest quintile of potassium intake (median intake, 2,400 mg/day)."*⁹

Potassium Supplementation: Should You or Shouldn't You?

Only 2 percent of U.S. adults get the recommended daily amount of 4,700 mg of potassium.¹⁰ This is especially problematic because potassium is a nutrient that needs to be kept in proper balance with sodium in your blood.

If you consume too much sodium, which is common if you eat a lot of processed foods, you'll have an increased need for potassium.

Deficiency may be related to taking diuretic medication, however, anyone who eats a poor diet — an excess of processed foods and not enough fresh, whole foods — is potentially at risk of inadequate potassium levels.

It should be noted that your body generally does a remarkable job of regulating levels on its own, without any outside help from a supplement, but also, too much potassium in the system is a rarity. Additionally, potassium supplements are not recommended for anyone taking an ACE inhibitor or who has kidney disease.¹¹

The fact is, if you want to increase your potassium, you will do much better by eating more foods that contain it, as opposed to taking a synthetic supplement with potential side effects, especially since the amount obtained from supplements is negligible, according to Sonya Angelone, a spokeswoman for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics:

*"Low potassium syndrome, or hypokalemia, is usually either a side effect of antibiotics or diuretics or a symptom of a more serious condition like kidney disease or hyperthyroidism, and treating the underlying condition will often resolve the deficiency."*¹²

Diarrhea, vomiting and overactive sweat glands can also cause low potassium syndrome. Other individuals most apt to develop hypokalemia are usually people who:

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Have an eating disorder | Take a diuretic medication |
| Have had bariatric surgery | Have AIDS |
| Are alcoholic | Use too many laxatives |

The amount of potassium in multivitamins and supplements is not to exceed 100 mg because people with kidney disease may have serious reactions, and it may also fail to play well with high blood pressure medications, laxatives and over-the-counter painkillers.

What Foods Bring Potassium to Your Table?

| Food | Potassium (mg) Per 100 grams | Amount | Potassium (mg) per |
|----------------------|------------------------------|----------|--------------------|
| Beet greens, cooked | 903 | ½ cup | 650 |
| Avocado | 485 | 1 | 975 |
| Baked potato w/ skin | 531 | 1 medium | 919 |

| | | | |
|-------------------------|-----|-----------------|-----|
| Black beans, cooked | 374 | ½ cup | 322 |
| Banana | 358 | 1 small | 362 |
| Salmon, canned | 336 | 3 oz. | 286 |
| Carrots, baby, raw | 320 | 10 | 320 |
| Spinach, cooked, frozen | 301 | ½ cup | 309 |
| Broccoli, cooked, fresh | 291 | ½ cup | 268 |
| Cantaloupe | 267 | 1 cup | 417 |
| Tomato, fresh | 237 | ½ medium | 146 |
| Orange | 181 | 1 medium | 237 |
| Yogurt, plain, low-fat | 234 | 6 oz. container | 398 |

Many are aware that bananas contain high amounts of potassium, but several other foods exceed the amount they provide. An [avocado](#) contains twice as much at 975 mg, for instance. On a very long list of all the foods contributing potassium, vegetables and fruits are generally nearest the top, followed by [dairy products](#) and meats such as poultry and fish, as this chart¹³ indicates:

The George Mateljan Foundation noted in an article about potassium that:

"Some legumes, fish, and dairy products can also make important contributions to our daily potassium intake; yet, because these foods have more calories, they are not as highly rated by our Nutrient Richness System. For example, Swiss chard and lima beans both contain nearly 1000 milligrams of potassium, but because a serving of lima beans contains six times as many calories than a serving of chard, the nutrient richness of the chard is higher."¹⁴

A list concentrating on nutrient-dense foods with high potassium content for the lowest caloric intake is topped by beet greens, [Swiss chard](#) and spinach, all rated as "excellent," as they provide 37, 27 and 24 percent of your daily requirement, respectively.¹⁵ The next 10, garnering a "very good" rating regarding the daily requirement, are:

| Food | Percentage of your daily requirement |
|------------------|---|
| Bok choy | 18 percent |
| Beets | 15 percent |
| Brussels sprouts | 14 percent |
| Broccoli | 13 percent |
| Cantaloupe | 12 percent |
| Tomatoes | 12 percent |
| Asparagus | 12 percent |
| Cabbage | 11 percent |
| Carrots | 11 percent |
| Fennel | 10 percent |
| Summer squash | 10 percent |

Leg Cramps and Muscle Spasms: How Potassium Can Save the Day

What many don't realize is that sodium and potassium work in tandem. The former is required for the latter to maintain its equilibrium in an optimized system.

While you expect to benefit from foods containing high amounts of potassium, many manufacturers add so much sodium that the ratio is 2:1, completely offsetting any potential health benefit. It's generally recommended that you consume five times more potassium than sodium. If your ratio is out of balance:

- First, ditch all processed foods, which are very high in processed salt and low in potassium and other essential nutrients
- Eat a diet of whole, unprocessed foods, ideally organically and locally grown to ensure optimal nutrient content. This type of diet will naturally provide much larger amounts of potassium in relation to sodium
- When using added salt, use a natural salt. I believe [Himalayan salt](#) may be the most ideal, as it contains lower sodium and higher potassium levels compared to other salts

Low potassium levels have precipitated frequent and painful muscle spasms and leg cramps in some people. While medical doctors often prescribe an anti-spasm or anti-inflammatory medication, eating more potassium-rich foods may help prevent leg cramps in the long run.