Pocket Guide to Managing High Potassium (Hyperkalemia)

A tool to help patients and caregivers have more effective dialogue with their healthcare teams.

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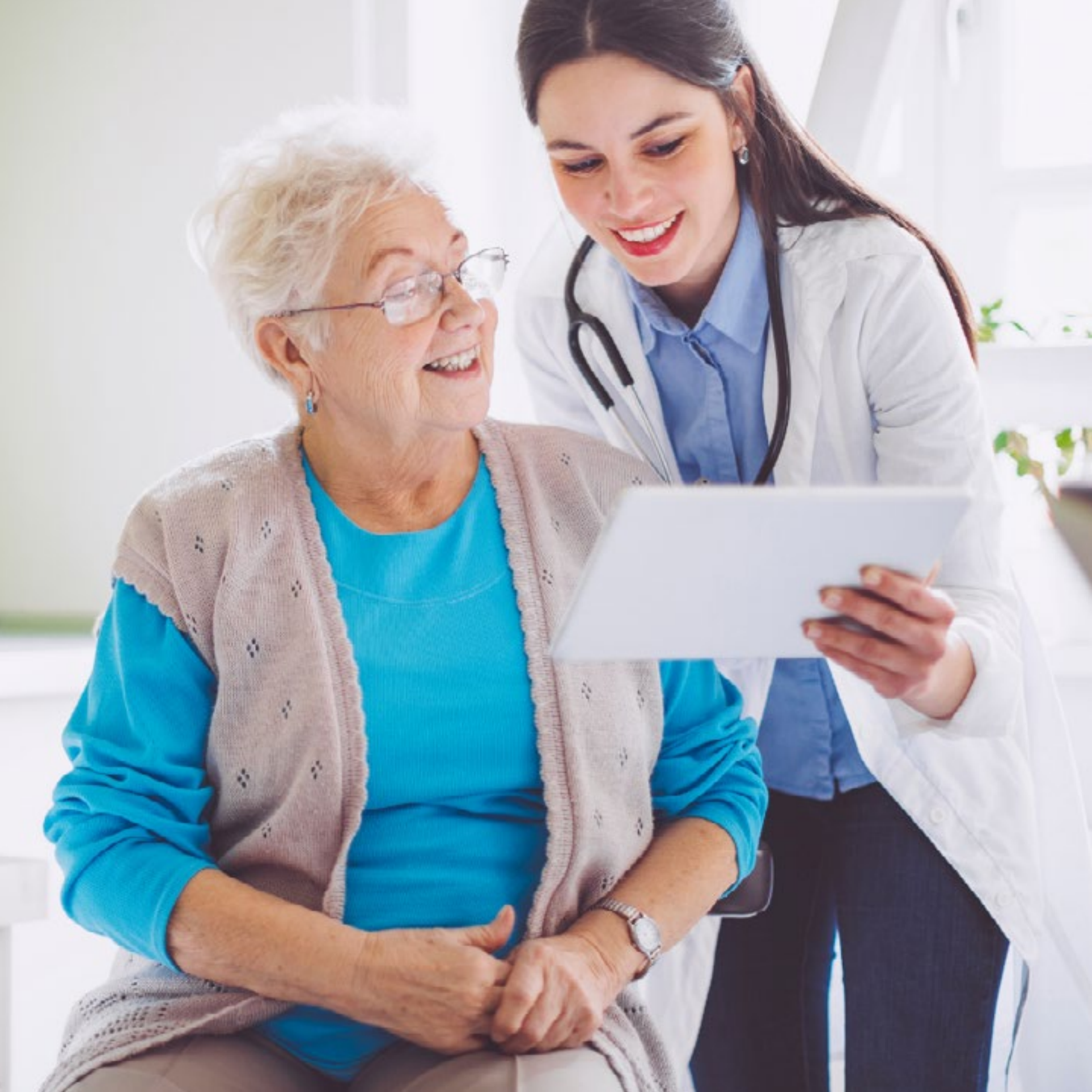


What is hyperkalemia? Hyper what? What does this word mean?

First, let's break this word down. One way to remember this medical term is the first few letters "Hyper" means excess or too much.

The symbol "K+" represents the word potassium. When you combine Hyper (too much) with K+ (potassium), this = too much potassium, also known as hyperkalemia. Hyperkalemia is a condition in which there is too much potassium in your blood.

What is potassium and what does potassium do?

Potassium is a very important nutrient that lives in the cells in your body and has a lot of jobs to perform. Potassium helps your heart beat regularly, controls blood pressure, balances fluid *(do you ever feel bloated?)*, helps muscles to move *(let's go walk the dog)* and sends nerve signals throughout the body *(don't touch that hot stove!)*. But, if the cells have too much potassium (hyperkalemia), the body will not work properly.

How will I know if I have high potassium in my body?

Potassium levels are checked when you have your blood drawn. Normal potassium levels are between 3.5 – 5.0 mEq/L. If your blood work shows a potassium level higher than 5.0 mEq/L, then your healthcare team will get in touch with you right away. You may need medicine to help lower the amount of potassium in your cells. You will now need to have your blood drawn routinely to monitor your potassium levels.

Normal Potassium Level is between 3.5 - 5.0 mEq/L

What happens if my potassium levels too high?

Here are some symptoms you may feel if your potassium levels get too high:

- Tiredness or fatigue
- Muscle cramps
- Diarrhea and vomiting
- Confusion
- Weakness
- Numbness and tingling in fingers and toes
- Heart racing
- Paralysis
- ***Your heart may stop!***

Is it related to my kidney disease, my medication, or both?

High potassium may be related to both!

High potassium may be caused by your chronic kidney disease. The kidneys help keep the right amount of potassium in your cells without you even knowing it is happening. If your kidneys are not working properly, too much potassium may stay in your cells and may cause you to feel sick. Because potassium helps the heart beat regularly, having safe levels of potassium is extremely important!

High potassium may also be caused by some blood pressure medications. If you are taking a medication called an ACE inhibitor, spironolactone or triamterene, your healthcare team may make changes to be certain you don't have too much potassium in your cells.

What medications do I need to avoid?

High Potassium may also be caused by some medications such as NSAIDs (ex. ibuprofen) or herbal supplements. Talk to your healthcare team about any other medications or over the counter supplements you are taking. It is important to know if there could be any potential negative interactions you would want to avoid.

What medications will control it? Or help reduce it?

There are a variety of “water pills”. Some “water pills” may be prescribed to help remove excess water from your body. By doing this, it lowers your potassium level. “Water pills” will make you urinate, and potassium will be removed through your urine with certain “water pills”. A potassium binding medication may be prescribed to treat high potassium. It works by binding or attaching to the excess potassium and pulling it out of your blood cells.

You will have to use the bathroom as the excess potassium is released in your stool.

I was told I have high potassium. Now what?

High potassium is very serious, but the good news is, it can be managed. You must eat a diet lower in potassium, take the medication you have been given to control it, and have your blood drawn regularly to be certain your potassium level is safe and within the normal range of 3.5-5.0 mEq/L.

Is high potassium related to my diet?

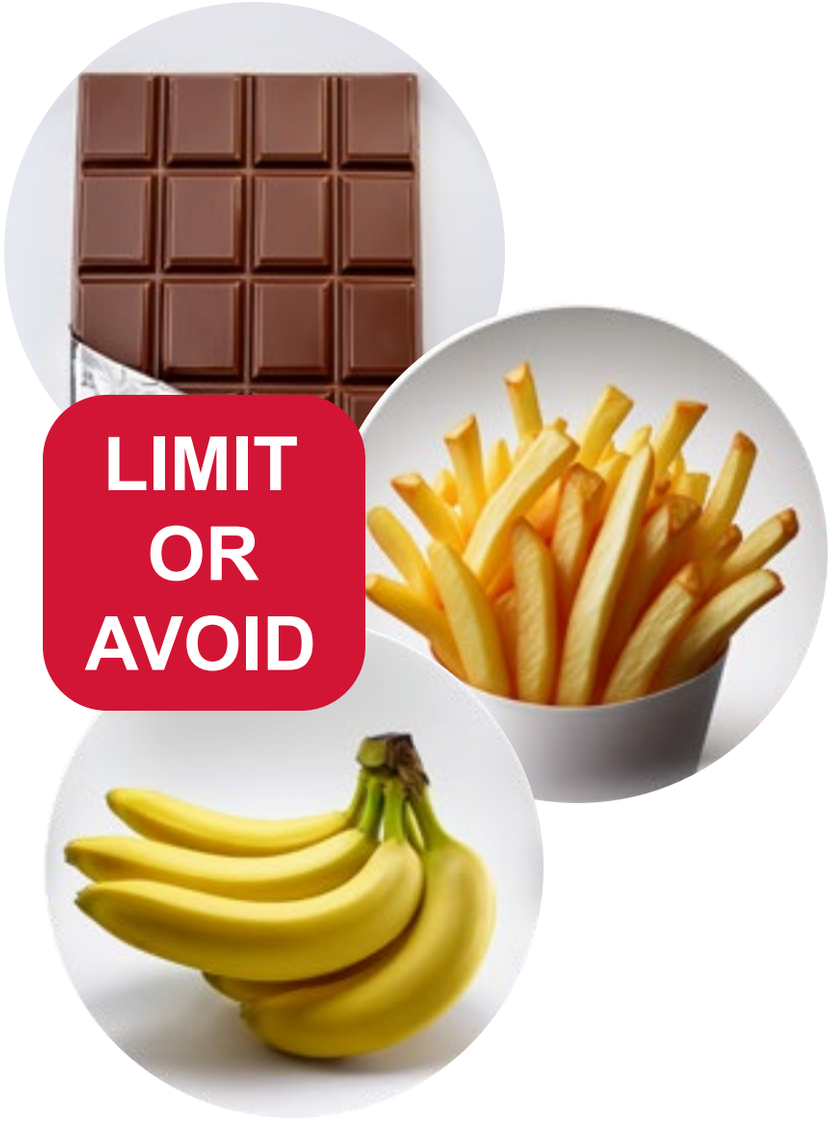
High potassium may be related to the foods you eat. If you have chronic kidney disease, you should eat foods that are lower in potassium. You should avoid foods that are soaked in syrups, foods that come in a can, and salt substitutes. Talk to a dietitian that specializes in kidney disease for specific advice or visit www.eatright.org to find one near you!

How much potassium in my diet is too much?

Your healthcare team will tell you how much potassium per day is safe to eat. Food Nutrition labels are a helpful resource to know how much potassium is in the food you are eating. Portion size is important, too. Even though a food may be lower in potassium, if you have two portions or even three, that amount of potassium has now doubled or tripled. If potassium isn't list on the label, check the ingredients for hidden potassium.

What foods should I limit or avoid?

- Chocolate bar
  (609mg for 1 small bar)
- Sweet potatoes
  (542 mg for 1 medium)
- Potatoes
  (463mg for ½ cup scalloped potatoes or 314mg for ½ mashed potatoes)
- French fries
  (411mg for 1 small serving)
- Bananas
  (403 mg for ½ cup)



Foods you can enjoy in moderation!

- Cooked spinach
  (287mg for ½ cup)
- Tomatoes
  (264mg for red, ripe, canned, stewed ½ cup)
- Orange juice
  (222mg for ½ cup)
- Angel food cake
  (26mg for 1 piece)
- White rice
  (27mg for ½ cup)
- Noodles (egg)
  (47mg for ½ cup)
- Apples
  (67mg for ½ cup)
- Cauliflower
  (88mg ½ cup)
- Grapes
  (88mg for ½ cup)
- Strawberries
  (117 mg for ½ cup)

Helpful Tips!

Always carry of a list of your medicines, including anything you take from over the counter. Be sure to include the dose and time of day you take your medicine.

Know your potassium level (goal is 3.5-5.0 mEq/L).

Know the signs & symptoms of high potassium and when to call 911 or your healthcare team if you’re not feeling well.

NOTES:

AAKP
American Association of Kidney Patients

www.aakp.org | www.aakp.org/join
info@aakp.org | (800) 749-2257

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