

5 Signs You May Be Low In Potassium

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When you think of the nutrients you need to be your healthiest, potassium probably isn't one that springs to mind—but it should. This vital mineral plays an essential role in many of the body's most crucial functions, including regulating fluids and keeping muscles working properly.

A new study, published in the [Clinical Journal of the American Society of Nephrology](#), suggests that getting ample potassium may even protect you from heart and kidney disease. Although the researchers focused on people with type 2 [diabetes](#), "it's reasonable to assume that the findings would pertain to those without diabetes as well," says Pete Miller, MD, PhD, a professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

The bad news is that few people are getting enough. [The Institute of Medicine recommends](#) that adults get at least 4,700 milligrams of potassium each day, but most of us consume barely half that amount. In fact, the US Dietary Guidelines call out potassium as a "nutrient of concern," says Angela Lemond, RDN, a spokesperson for the [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#).

So how do you know if you're covered? It can be hard to tell. Routine tests don't check for potassium deficiency, and you might not notice any physical symptoms. That said, here are a few signs that you might be lacking.

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Your typical plate isn't colorful.

Fruits and vegetables are, hands down, the richest sources of potassium, so several colors of the rainbow ought to be present at most of your meals. If your plate tends to be pretty monochromatic, it probably means you're eating mostly meats, refined starches, and foods that comes out of a bag or box—and not getting enough potassium. "Potassium is a marker of an overall healthy diet," says Miller. Levels tend to be lowest among people with the least access to fresh food. (Start eating healthier and reverse health conditions with [The Power Nutrient Solution](#).)

You feel tired and weak.

It's true that just about [anything could be zapping your energy](#). But if you've been logging plenty of shut-eye but still feel pretty blah, take a look at your diet. "Eating more potassium-rich fruits and vegetables may make you feel more vital," says Lemond. No change? It's time to talk to your doc about what else might be going on.

You have high blood pressure.

Many things—including your family history, being overweight, and eating too much salt—can cause your pressure to soar. But at least one study found that rats fed a low-potassium diet ended up with hypertension, says David Mount, MD, a nephrologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital. Potassium matters because it helps offset sodium: Many people eat too many salty foods and not nearly enough fruits and vegetables, which throws the balance off and contributes to hypertension. (That's why most of [these 13 foods that lower blood pressure](#) are high in potassium.)

You're prone to charley horses.

If painful muscle spasms in your legs are all too familiar, a lack of potassium could be to blame. "Athletes who work out hard and sweat a lot often get charley horses," says Lemond. That's because electrolytes, including potassium, get out of whack when you sweat excessively. The quickest fix is to reach for a [sports drink](#) that contains electrolytes. "Don't just guzzle water," says Lemond, or the problem might worsen.

You have heart palpitations.

When your potassium levels become extremely low, it can be very serious. If you feel like your heart is pounding, fluttering, or about to skip out of your chest, you might have an irregular heartbeat. Seek medical treatment right away.

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How to Up Your Intake

The best way to get more potassium is to eat a wide variety of fruits and vegetables throughout the day. But there are certain potassium superstars in the produce aisle. Though people think of bananas when it comes to potassium, a baked potato with its skin has twice as much. Other rich sources include spinach, strawberries, avocado, broccoli, and Swiss chard.