Heart failure and potassium

Your body depends on the mineral potassium to help control the electrical balance of your heart as well as metabolize carbohydrates and build muscle.

Low potassium levels can cause muscle weakness and heart rhythm disturbances. On the other hand, too much potassium can cause dangerous heartbeat irregularities and even sudden death. If you have heart failure, you need to pay close attention to how much potassium you get each day. What’s more, some heart failure drugs can cause your body to excrete too much potassium, while others can cause your body to retain too much potassium.

Your doctor can tell you how the medications you need will affect your potassium levels. You’ll likely need to have your potassium level checked regularly to be sure it is within a good range for you.

If you need to raise your potassium level:

If your potassium level is too low, the solution may be as simple as taking potassium supplements.

If you need to get your potassium level down:

If your potassium level is too high, you may need to cut back on certain foods (see the table). These tips can also help:

- Soak or boil vegetables and fruits to leach out some of the potassium.
- Avoid foods that list potassium or K, KCl, or K+ — chemical symbols for potassium or related compounds — as ingredients on the label.
- Stay away from salt substitutes. Many are high in potassium. Read the ingredient lists carefully and check with your doctor before using one of these preparations.
- Avoid canned, salted, pickled, corned, spiced, or smoked meat and fish.
- Avoid imitation meat products containing soy or vegetable protein.
- Limit high-potassium fruits such as bananas, citrus fruits, and avocados.
- Avoid baked potatoes and baked acorn and butternut squash.
- Don’t use vegetables or meats prepared with sweet or salted sauces.
- Avoid all types of peas and beans, which are naturally high in potassium.

Potassium levels in common foods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High potassium</th>
<th>Medium potassium</th>
<th>Low potassium</th>
<th>No potassium</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fruits and vegetables</td>
<td>Artichokes, avocados, bananas, broccoli, coconut, dried fruits, leafy greens, kiwis, nectarines, oranges, papayas, potatoes, prunes, spinach, tomatoes, winter squash, yams</td>
<td>Apples, apricots, asparagus, carrots, cherries, corn, eggplant, peaches, pears, peppers, pineapple juice, radishes</td>
<td>Blueberries, cauliflower, cucumbers, grapefruit, grapes, green beans, lettuce, strawberries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat and protein</td>
<td>Dried beans and peas, imitation bacon bits, nuts, soy products</td>
<td>Beef, eggs, fish, peanut butter, poultry, pork, veal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dairy</td>
<td>Milk, yogurt</td>
<td>Sour cream</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grains and processed foods</td>
<td>Plain bagel, plain pasta, oatmeal, white bread, white rice</td>
<td>Bran muffins and cereals, corn tortillas, whole-wheat bread</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fruit punches, jelly beans, nondairy topping, nondairy creamers</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

To learn more about the diagnosis and treatment of heart failure, buy [Diagnosis: Heart Failure](http://www.health.harvard.edu/promotions/harvard-health-publications/diagnosis-heart-failure), a Special Health Report from Harvard Medical School.

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