Hyperkalemia

Potassium is found in your body. Hyperkalemia is when you have too much potassium in your blood.

CAUSES

Your potassium level can become too high in the following ways:

- You take in too much potassium. You can do this by:
  - Using salt substitutes. They contain large amounts of potassium.
  - Taking potassium supplements from your caregiver. The dose may be too high.
  - Eating foods or taking nutritional products with potassium.
- You get rid of (*excrete*) too little potassium. This can happen if:
  - Your kidneys are not functioning properly. Kidney (*renal*) disease is a very common cause of hyperkalemia.
  - You are taking medications that lower your excretion of potassium (for example, certain diuretic medications).
  - You have an adrenal gland disease called Addison's disease.
- You release a high amount of potassium from your cells into your blood. You may have a condition that causes potassium to shift from your cells to your bloodstream. This can happen with:
  - Injury to muscle or other tissues. Most potassium is in the muscle.
  - Severe burns or infections.
  - Acidic blood plasma (*acidosis*). Acidosis happens in many diseases (i.e., out-of-control diabetes).

SYMPTOMS

Usually, there are no symptoms unless the potassium is dangerously high or has risen very quickly. Symptoms may include:

- Irregular heartbeat.
- Feeling sick to your stomach (*nausea*).
- Tiredness (*fatigue*).
- Nerve problems such as tingling of the skin, numbness of the hands or feet, weakness or paralysis can occur. The heart can be affected.

DIAGNOSIS

A simple blood test can measure the amount of potassium in your body. An electrocardiogram (heart tracing) can also help make the diagnosis. **The heart may beat dangerously fast or stop beating with severe hyperkalemia.**

TREATMENT

Treatment depends on how bad the condition is and on the underlying cause.

- If the hyperkalemia is an emergency (causing heart problems or paralysis), many different medicines can be used alone or together to lower the potassium level briefly. This may include an insulin injection even if you are not diabetic.
- Emergency mechanical blood cleaning (*dialysis*) may be needed to remove potassium from the body.
- If the hyperkalemia is less severe or dangerous, then attention to the underlying cause is treated. This can include medications if needed. Your prescription medications may be changed. You may also need to take a medicine to help your body get rid of potassium. You may need to eat a diet low in potassium.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Take medications and supplements as directed by your caregiver.
- **Do not** take any over-the-counter medicines, supplements, natural products, herbs or vitamins without reviewing them with your caregiver. Certain supplements and natural food products can have high amounts of potassium. Other products (such as Ibuprofen) can damage weak kidneys and raise your potassium.

- You may be asked to do repeat lab tests. Be sure to follow these directions.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

You notice:

- An irregular heartbeat.
- Lightheadedness.
- Weakness that is unusual for you.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have shortness of breath.
- You have chest discomfort.
- You have times where you pass out.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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