Hypokalemia

Hypokalemia means a low potassium level in the blood. Symptoms are weakness, fatigue, or irregularities of the heartbeat. Sometimes hypokalemia is discovered by your caregiver if you are taking certain medicines for high blood pressure or kidney disease.

Potassium is an electrolyte that helps regulate the amount of fluid in the body. It also stimulates muscle contraction and maintains a stable acid-base balance. If potassium levels go too low or too high, your health may be in danger. You are at risk for developing shock, heart and lung problems. *Hypokalemia* can occur if you have excessive diarrhea, vomiting, or sweating. Potassium can be lost through your kidneys in the urine. Certain common medicines can also cause potassium loss, especially water pills (*diuretics*). The same is possible with cortisone-type medication or certain types of antibiotics. Low potassium can be dangerous if you are taking certain heart medicines (such as Digoxin). In diabetes, your potassium may fall after you take insulin, especially if your diabetes had been out of control for a while. In rare cases, potassium may be low because you are not getting enough in your diet.

Potassium levels below 3.5 mEq/L are abnormal. Record your level today.

Hypokalemia can be treated with potassium supplements taken by mouth and a diet that is high in potassium. Foods with high potassium content are:

- Peas, lentils, lima beans, nuts, and dried fruit.
- Whole grain and bran cereals and breads.
- Fresh fruit and vegetables. Examples include:
  - Bananas.
  - Cantaloupe.
  - Grapefruit.
  - Oranges.
  - Tomatoes.
  - Honeydew melons.
  - Potatoes.
- Orange and tomato juices.
- Meats.

See your caregiver as instructed for a follow-up blood test to be sure your potassium is back to normal.

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