

**On Nutrition: by Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E.**

## Phenomenal Potassium

Summertime is the ideal time to enjoy all the fresh fruits and vegetables that nature has to offer. And what could be better than a handful of fresh cherries, a slice of juicy watermelon or the first bite of a delectable peach? Fruits and vegetables are good for what ails us we're told, and there certainly is truth to that. Just bursting with antioxidants with fancy-sounding names like carotenes, polyphenols, and ellagic acid, they help protect us from oxidative stress, inflammation, and if you've checked out the literature on blueberries recently, even cognitive decline.

Though they work their magic in a variety of ways, there's one super nutrient that all fruits and veggies have in common, and that's potassium. Potassium power is potent, make no mistake about it. For example, in a recent study of nearly 6000 men and women over age 65 published in the journal *Neurology*, those with the lowest intake of potassium were one and a half times more likely to have a stroke over the next 4 to 8 years than those with highest intakes of potassium.

Among those taking diuretic medication for high blood pressure (these medications tend to lower levels of blood potassium), the risk of stroke was *two and a half times higher*



if their potassium intake was low.

What's a healthy intake of potassium? Experts define high potassium as more than 4 grams a day, while low potassium intake is defined as less than 2.4 grams a day. Note that we're talking grams here, not milligrams. In 2004 the Food and Nutrition Board of the Institute of Medicine determined that an adequate intake (AI) for potassium for those 14 and older is 4.7 grams, or 4700 mgs. This amount is based on the capacity of potassium to normalize blood pressure and reduce the risk of kidney stones. Bottom line: we need potassium -, lots of it -, and fruits and vegetables are loaded with it..

### **The sodium/potassium seesaw**

Potassium belongs to a family of minerals known as electrolytes meaning literally, that they are capable of conducting electricity in solution. These are the minerals that help keep the

body's fluid levels in balance, and are essential to help the muscles, heart, and other organs perform effectively. Potassium actually lives in a symbiotic relationship, of sorts, with sodium, another mineral, regulated by a sodium-potassium "pump" that keeps these critical electrolytes both inside and outside your cells in just the right concentrations. It's the tight relationship between the two that generates the critical spark required for nerve impulse transmission, muscle contraction and heart function.

Getting the balance between the two is all the more important when it comes to controlling hypertension. With approximately 25% of American adults and more than 50% of adults over 60 having high blood pressure, it's clear that most Americans are loading up on sodium via store-bought processed foods and snacks, while not getting enough potassium through fruits and vegetables. This imbalance sets the stage for sodium overload, which, in susceptible people is the final insult before the prescription pad comes out and the hypertension medication goes in.

"We are a nation of salt eaters," says Dr. Robert Russell, Vice Chair of the Food and Nutrition Board at the Institute of

Medicine. “People need to decrease their sodium intake to help control and prevent high blood pressure and coronary disease. One way is to add more potassium to the diet. Potassium helps to counter the effects of salt.”

And that’s not all. The Linus Pauling Institute reports “significant positive associations between dietary potassium intake and bone mineral density.” Upping dietary potassium intake by increasing fruit and vegetable consumption has been found to decrease urinary calcium excretion – not only benefiting bones, but decreasing the risk of kidney stones too.

### **Potassium’s on the Perimeter**

Finding good sources of potassium is a cinch, if you shop the perimeter of the supermarket where the fresh fruits and vegetables are kept. Straying into the center area puts you smack dab in the danger zone of processed foods and salty, sugary snacks. Instead, head to the produce section and help yourself to some of the following high potassium fruits and veggies: bananas, canteloupe, potatoes, avocados, chard, cooked spinach, broccoli, yams, squash and brussel sprouts. Fish is another great source of potassium, but there are many, many more. To learn about

them, check out [www.whfoods.com](http://www.whfoods.com), (World’s Healthiest Foods) and look under “potassium.” And stock up on those summer fruits and vegetables while the getting’s good!

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