

DON'T CURB YOUR POTASSIUM!

Keep your heart healthy with this everyday nutrient.

Your heart's ability to beat, beat consistently, and subsequently pump blood and carry oxygen to the body is dependent on electrical impulses within its muscle cells.

The impulses are regulated by electrolytes, including sodium and potassium. These two nutrients also influence blood pressure. Renowned cardiologist and author of the best-sellers *The Great American Heart Hoax* and *The Miami Mediterranean Diet*, Michael Ozner, MD, talks about recent research highlighting the importance of keeping your sodium intake low and increasing potassium levels through dietary sources for optimum cardiovascular health.

WHAT IS BLOOD PRESSURE AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Blood pressure is the force of the blood against the artery walls as it travels in the body. It is measured by two numbers—systolic (top number), or peak force at the time of pumping, and diastolic (bottom number), or the force when the heart is filling. The ideal blood pressure is less than 120/80 mmHg. Almost one in three adult Americans has high blood pressure, defined as 140/90 mmHg or higher. Another 25% have prehypertension, or blood pressures of 120/80–140/90 mmHg. Chronic hypertension is associated with an increased risk for stroke, heart attack, heart and kidney failure.

WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT HYPERTENSION AND ELECTROLYTES?

Sodium is an essential electrolyte, but it is necessary only in moderate amounts. It is widely understood that excessive sodium intake can increase blood pressure. When healthy people consume too much salt, the kidneys adjust by retaining water and extracellular fluid volume increases, resulting in higher blood pressure. Because of this, the American Heart Association recommends that the average person limit their sodium intake to less than 2,300 mg per day.

Many people don't know that just a teaspoon of table salt has 2,000 mg of sodium. It is easy to exceed the recommended limits.

Potassium is an important electrolyte in the diet because it can lower blood pressure, partly by helping the kidneys excrete excess sodium. But most people consume far less than the daily goal of 4,700 mg. In general, I like people to reduce their sodium, and increase their potassium, magnesium and calcium intake. It is important to remember that I am not talking about increasing these amounts through supplements. The data show that the benefit is linked to eating foods rich in these nutrients.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SHOW REGARDING SODIUM AND POTASSIUM INTAKES AFFECTING HYPERTENSION?

Research has shown that a diet low in sodium and rich in potassium can lower blood pressure. Data has shown that the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet, which is rich in fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy, lean meats and whole grains, significantly reduces blood pressure in men and women with hypertension, compared to an everyday diet. It should be noted that the DASH diet is very similar to the Mediterranean diet, which has also been shown to decrease blood pressure.

Potassium also affects other cardiac functions. To maintain a normal heart rhythm, you need adequate amounts of potassium in the bloodstream. This is why we measure electrolytes as part of a standard blood test. As the heart cells are depleted of potassium, the heart becomes irritable and arrhythmias, or irregular heart beats, occur. If the arrhythmia originates in the ventricle (the lower chamber of the heart), the result can sometimes be life threatening. One of the ways we can lower the risk of sudden cardiac death is to make sure we all have ample potassium and magnesium intake. And watch out for diuretic medications, as they deplete potassium and increase the likelihood of arrhythmia. **S**

**Don't increase potassium intake until you have talked to your doctor. It's contraindicated in those with kidney impairment and with certain medications such as potassium-sparing diuretics.*



Potent Foods

You may be surprised when you see how much sodium, or how little potassium, is in some of your favorite foods. For example, 3 ounces of baked ham can have up to 1,170 mg of sodium and only 308 mg of potassium. General recommendations are to keep the sodium count of any particular food item at less than 400 mg.

In comparison, 3 ounces of baked salmon has about 45 mg of sodium and 390 mg of potassium! Maybe it's time to switch up that holiday dinner tradition. Other favorites like sauerkraut, if you aren't making it

yourself, can run nearly 940 mg of sodium for one cup, with 241 mg of potassium. Apples are always a tasty bet, with 1 mg of sodium and 134 mg of potassium.

DR. OZNER'S TIPS FOR OPTIMAL BLOOD PRESSURE:

- Avoid/minimize processed foods.
- Try to avoid frozen foods, as they are high in sodium.
- Avoid pickles and luncheon meats.
- Minimize soda and beer consumption.
- Increase intake of fruits, veggies, whole grains, nuts, seeds and low-fat dairy products.