

# Potassium factsheet

## What is potassium?

Potassium is an essential mineral that is needed by all cells of the body. It is found in some food and drinks.

## Why do I need potassium?

It has many roles in the body:

- controlling movement of muscles, and heartbeat
- control of blood pressure
- regulating the amount of fluid in your body
- sending messages to our nervous system
- helps all the cells in the body work correctly

## Where do I get potassium from?

We get potassium from the food we eat. It is in many foods including:

- fruits
- vegetables
- potatoes
- nuts and seeds
- pulses like beans and lentils
- meat, fish, and dairy

In the UK, the recommended intake for potassium is 3.5g (3500mg) a day.

Most people do not get enough potassium from their diet food. You can make sure you get the right amount of potassium by eating a healthy balanced diet. This means:

- eating plenty of fruit and vegetables - fresh dried, tinned, and frozen all count
- eating nuts, seeds, beans and pulses
- eating moderate amounts of meat, fish, and dairy
- limiting processed foods

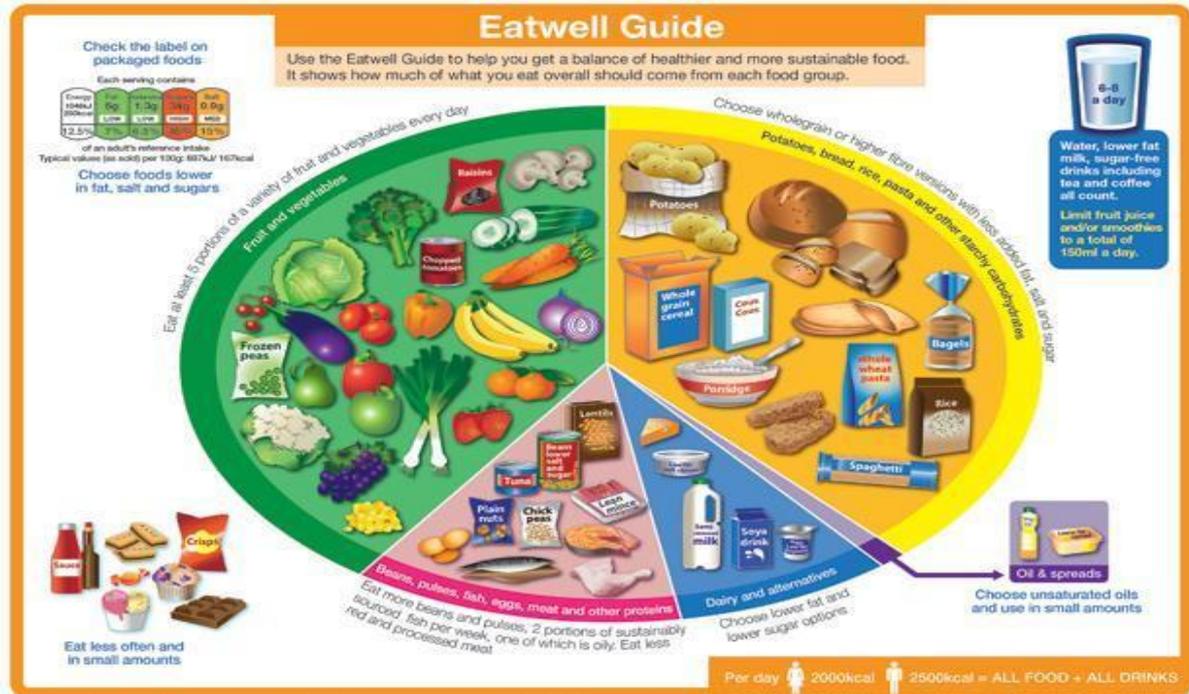
The eat well guide is a good starting point to help you plan a healthy balanced diet.



**BDA** The Association of UK Dietitians

# Renal Nutrition

Specialist Group



Source: Public Health England in association with the Welsh government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland.

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<p><b>Healthy Foods rich in potassium: - choose more of these</b></p>	<p><b>Ultra Processed foods: – choose less of these</b></p>
Fruits – fresh, dried, tinned or frozen	Convenience foods, packets or jars or ready-made sauces, instant noodles or pasta pots
Vegetables – fresh, tinned or frozen	Crisps, salty snacks, biscuits
Low fat dairy including milk and yoghurt	Ice creams, milkshakes, cakes and pastries
Beans and pulses, whole grains (brown bread/pasta/rice)	Processed meats like ham, sausage, bacon, cheese triangles and slices. Plant-based meat alternatives.
Unflavoured unsalted nuts and seeds	Flavoured, salted and coated nuts and seeds

## What is a processed food?

Processed food is not always unhealthy, for example tinned, frozen, or chopped vegetables. However, a diet high in ultra-processed food is usually low in potassium. 'Ultra-processed' means a food has changed a lot from the original form. These foods often have added fat, sugar, salt, and chemicals, which will make them less healthy. Look at the food labels (traffic lights) and ingredients.

## What happens if I don't get eat enough potassium from my diet?

Eating enough potassium rich foods helps to lessen the unhealthy effect of sodium (salt) in the body. This is due to the way our kidneys get rid of sodium. If you don't eat enough potassium, it can lead to high blood pressure in the long term. High blood pressure increases the risk of stroke, and many heart problems.

As well as making sure we have foods containing potassium it is important to not have too much salt (sodium) in our diet. You need both to keep healthy- less salt and more potassium.

## What happens if my blood potassium level is too low?

A very low blood potassium level (hypokalaemia) is very rare and is usually caused by severe malnutrition, severe bowel disorders, or overuse of some medications.

This can be dangerous because it can cause problems with the way that your heart beats in the short term and is likely to need hospital treatment.

## What happens if my blood potassium level is too high?

A very small number of people are at risk of a high blood potassium. These people tend to have late-stage kidney disease. Not everyone with kidney disease will be at risk of a high blood potassium level. Do not limit potassium in your diet unless your doctor tells you to. This can cause poor nutrition.

High potassium levels (hyperkalaemia) can be dangerous. This can cause an irregular heartbeat in the short term which may cause a heart attack. Other immediate problems can be breathing problems, sickness, cramps and weakness. High blood potassium is caused by kidney disease, severe muscle breakdown, and some medications.

## How can I include more potassium in my diet?

- Aim for 5 or more portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- Add fruit and vegetables to every meal, such as fruit on cereal, salad in sandwiches and vegetables with main meals
- Try fruit or vegetables as a snack - carrot sticks with hummus or soft cheese
- Add extra vegetables to your meals – try adding celery to your Bolognese, or mushrooms to your chicken curry
- Include 3 portions of dairy in your day – milk on cereal, a yogurt and a portion of soft cheese would count
- Try to cook from scratch some new healthy recipes just once or twice a week until that becomes a regular habit

## Key points on potassium

- Potassium is an essential mineral for our body to work properly
- We get potassium from a diet rich in vegetables, fruit, wholegrains and pulses
- Diets without enough potassium can lead to high blood pressure, other heart problems and stroke
- A diet rich in potassium is healthy for almost everyone
- Speak to your dietitian if you have kidney disease and are thinking about changing your diet

## Useful resources

- Eat well guide  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/528193/Eatwell\\_guide\\_colour.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/528193/Eatwell_guide_colour.pdf)
- British Heart Foundation Salt resources  
<https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/support/healthy-living/healthy-eating/salt>
- British Dietetic Association Position Statement on Processed food  
<https://www.bda.uk.com/uploads/assets/06661eb4-b635-44a7-b3a1f753525c8f99/53f7356a-51eb-42c9-b1fbc6680230fbf3/Processed-Food-Position-Statement-FINAL-approved.pdf>

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