

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Potassium, the Unknown Mineral

Sodium? We all get too much. Calcium? We don't get enough. Most people would be able to say that much about them, and they'd be correct. But ask about Potassium and all that many people would be able to tell you is that bananas have a lot of it. For something as essential to life, that little bit of misinformation is very unfortunate. On the other hand, it is a good example of how well most of our bodies manage to control potassium without our ever noticing it.

Potassium is one of the minerals that work to balance sodium. When one goes into a cell, the other comes out. That balance is absolutely necessary to keep us alive. When the potassium levels are out of balance then too much fluid is either going into or out of cells. Our nerves don't send the right messages, our muscles don't contract they way they should.

What does that feel like? If we don't have enough potassium our blood pressure will go up. Our body loses the ability to manage salt, and even a little bit could send our blood pressure sky high. It seriously increases our risk of cardiovascular disease, especially stroke and heart arrhythmias. Not enough potassium for a long time increases our risk of getting kidney stones. Because potassium is just as important as calcium for making strong bones, low potassium can lead to weak bones.

The normal way our bodies get rid of too much potassium is through our kidneys. So a diet very high in this mineral would put an extra stress on diseased kidneys.

Diabetes also stresses our kidneys. Some medications, especially diuretics for high blood pressure, force the kidneys to either get rid of too much potassium, or prevent it from getting rid of as much as it would like to. If your doctor prescribes a medication that will affect your potassium level, you might be told to either eat a lot of foods with potassium, or to avoid those foods.

That leads to that bit of misinformation about bananas. It is true that bananas have some potassium. But they certainly aren't the highest, or the lowest, source. The prize for the most potassium goes to an avocado. Depending on the size, one avocado could have as much as 1500 mg. Compared to that, the 450 mg in a banana is not very much! Other fruits and vegetables with more potassium than bananas include papayas, potatoes, and almost every kind of melon (cantaloupe, honeydew, etc.). Fruit juice can also have a lot, especially passionfruit juice. Most dried fruits - raisins, prunes, dried peaches, figs, dates - are high because the drying concentrates the minerals. Most kinds of dried beans - black, kidney, pintos - also have a lot of potassium.

The good thing is that, unless you are on a medicine and need to avoid potassium, there is no known danger from eating too many of these foods. But there is no upper level known to be toxic. In fact, most of us don't come close to getting as much as we should. The recommended amount for adults is 4,700 mg a day. Our American average intake is only about 3,000 for men and 2,300 for women.

Because potassium is so important for controlling blood pressure, if we ate enough potassium we might not have as many problems with hypertension. Here's an unusual but super colorful salad with lots of potassium. Choose one of the small 'individual' papayas, and a Florida 'Slim-cado' for lower fat. Some people have allergic

reactions to papaya seeds, so scoop out all those bright black seeds. Enjoy!

Papaya, Avocado and Lime Salad

1 small papaya	1 medium avocado
1 (8 oz) can sliced water chestnuts	1 tomato, diced
Juice from 1 lime (about 2 Tbsp)	1 Tbsp Dijon mustard
½ clove garlic, minced	1/3 C olive oil
1 Tbsp vinegar (Balsamic is good)	salt and pepper to taste

Peel and dice the papaya and avocado. Combine with drained water chestnuts and tomato. Drizzle with lime juice and mix gently. Refrigerate for 1 hour. Whisk the mustard, garlic, salt and pepper in small bowl. Gradually whisk in oil and vinegar until creamy. Adjust salt and pepper if desired. Add to fruit, mix until coated. Serves 8.

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