FACT SHEET ABOUT
Low Potassium (hypokalemia)

Q. What is low potassium (hypokalemia)?
A. Low potassium occurs when the level of potassium in the blood stream is lower than normal (less than 3.5 mEq/L). Normal levels are 3.5 to 5.0 milliequivalents (mEq/L).

Potassium is a mineral (electrolyte) that is crucial for the function of nerve and muscle cells, including those in the heart.

Q. If left untreated, what can it lead to?
A. Low potassium can be life threatening (paralysis, abnormal heart rhythms) and requires emergency medical attention.

Q. Who is at risk for low potassium?
A. The most common cause of low potassium is excessive loss in urine and/or from the digestive tract due to: certain diuretics (water pills), diarrhea, eating disorders, excessive use of laxatives, chronic kidney failure, primary aldosteronism, and vomiting. Other causes: deficient dietary intake, trauma/surgery/burns, Cushing’s syndrome, insulin administration, glucose administration, chemotherapy, and Cystic Fibrosis.

Q. What are some of the signs and symptoms of low potassium?
A. Weakness, fatigue, paralysis, muscle cramps, constipation, abnormal heart rhythms, fainting due to low blood pressure, abnormal psychological behavior: depression, psychosis, delirium, confusion, or hallucinations.
Q. What are some foods that can help increase potassium?
A. Spinach, mushrooms, beef, chicken, fish such as cod, salmon and sardines are the rich sources of potassium. Fresh vegetables such as broccoli, peas, lima beans and potatoes. Fresh fruit such as banana, citrus fruits, tomatoes, watermelon and strawberries.

Q. What is the treatment if signs and symptoms are noted?
A. Low potassium is usually found when the doctor has ordered blood tests or an electrocardiogram (ECG, EKG) to help diagnose a condition an individual is already experiencing.

To treat low potassium the doctor may need to change a medication that is affecting the potassium level, may need to treat another medical condition that is causing low potassium levels and may include potassium supplements.

Q. What are some preventive measures?
A. Treating the underlying cause, diet rich in potassium, supplements and medication as ordered by the physician.

www.mayoclinic.com/health/low-potassium/MY00760

For more information on this or any other physical or behavioral health topic, please call the HCQU office at 888-321-5861 or visit our website at www.hcqu.apshealthcare.com.

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