

Get Your Potassium and Stay Healthy

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Bananas, tomatoes, oranges, cantaloupe, peaches, spinach, [Swiss chard](#), lima beans, potatoes - these are some of the world's healthiest foods, in part because they are excellent sources of [potassium](#).

Potassium is an important mineral, one of a class known as electrolytes.

"When dissolved in water, electrolytes conduct electricity needed for nerves and muscles to do their work," according to Andi Weigand, APNP, a nurse practitioner serving Fond du Lac Regional Clinic patients in Brandon and Ripon. "Both nerves and muscles need a good supply of potassium. The mineral plays a role in the storage of carbohydrates in the muscles for endurance activities, and it helps regulate the body's fluid balance and blood pressure. When there is insufficient potassium, nerves and muscles fail to function as they should, and the heart may lose its ability to stay in normal rhythm."

About one of every five Americans admitted to a hospital has a potassium deficiency. The good news is that it's easy to get the potassium you need by eating a balanced diet.

More Potassium, Less Sodium

The Institute of Medicine, in a recent report, recommended intake of 4.7 grams of potassium a day, but most American adults consume less than half that amount. One major benefit from consuming more potassium is to blunt the effect of too much [sodium](#). However, Americans actually get about twice as much sodium as they should which can cause hypertension, [high blood pressure](#) and other heart concerns.

Deli meats – even chicken and turkey – are cured and have high concentrations of sodium relative to potassium. Canned goods and soups are also notoriously high in sodium as are most restaurant meals. Fresh fruits – such as apricots, bananas, peaches and oranges – are particularly good sources of potassium and excellent alternatives to salty snacks.

"It's important not to try to improve your potassium supplements without the advice of your doctor," Weigand says. "There is also no need to get concerned on counting milligrams of potassium. If you center your diet around fresh foods that you cook yourself, with at least five servings of fruits and vegetables, you'll be getting the potassium you need."