



Understanding The Hidden Danger Of High Potassium Levels

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(NAPSA)—One morning in July 2015, Gary Bodenheimer, 69, a retired behavioral management teacher, was playing a game of pool with his buddies at his local senior center in Elwood, Nebraska, when he began feeling light-headed, weak and short of breath. Gary chalked up the symptoms to his kidneys, as he suffers from Stage 4 chronic kidney disease (CKD).

Later that day, Gary was rushed to the emergency department at the local hospital, where he had blood work done and was told by the on-call physician that his potassium was very high—over 7—and that he had hyperkalemia. “This was the first time I heard about hyperkalemia,” says Gary. “No one had mentioned the possibility of this happening with my kidney disease.”

Gary was admitted to the hospital and hooked up to a heart monitor. A few days later, he asked the physician, “Just how bad was I?” and was told, “It was bad. Your heart could have stopped.” Gary was monitored and treated in the hospital for three days before being discharged. Later, he learned from his nephrologist that the important medication he was taking to treat his CKD can cause the side effect of elevating blood levels of potassium. Unfortunately, this is a problem patients with CKD may face that doctors have been challenged with for a long time.

What Is Hyperkalemia?

Everyone needs potassium. It is an important nutrient that helps keep your heart healthy and your muscles working properly. But too much potassium can be dangerous. Hyperkalemia, which is believed to affect as many as 3 million people in the United States, primarily those with CKD, can have harmful consequences. If not managed, it can lead to serious heart problems.

The majority of potassium (98%) is stored inside cells and released into the bloodstream as needed. For most people, the level of potassium in the blood should be between 3.5 and 5.0. In healthy people, excess potassium is primarily excreted through the kidneys. People with CKD have decreased kidney function, so this process can become compromised, putting them at risk for hyperkalemia. In addition, as Gary experienced, certain medications that are often prescribed to peo-

ple with CKD to help delay the progression of their underlying disease, can cause hyperkalemia as a side effect.

Who Is At Risk?

You may be at risk for hyperkalemia if you:

- ✓ Have kidney disease.
- ✓ Have advanced kidney disease and eat a diet high in potassium.
- ✓ Take certain drugs that prevent the kidneys from losing enough potassium, causing your potassium levels to rise. These include renin angiotensin aldosterone system (RAAS) inhibitors, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), and beta blockers. Discuss all medicines that you take with your doctor. Do not stop taking any medicines on your own.

✓ Take extra potassium, such as certain salt substitutes or supplements.

✓ Have Addison’s disease, a disorder that can occur if your body does not make enough of certain hormones.

- ✓ Have poorly controlled diabetes.
- ✓ Experience a serious injury or severe burn.

What Are The Symptoms?

Many people with high potassium have few, if any, symptoms. If symptoms do appear, they are usually mild and non-specific, and can include muscle weakness, numbness, tingling, nausea, or other unusual feelings. Because of this, many CKD patients—like Gary—are unaware that their potassium levels are elevated.

How Is It Diagnosed?

High potassium usually develops slowly over many weeks or months, and it can recur. A simple blood test can determine the level of potassium in the blood.

Are There Options?

Acute Episodes

When high potassium happens suddenly and blood levels are very high, you may feel heart palpitations, shortness of breath, chest pain, nausea or vomiting. This is a life-threatening condition that requires immediate medical care. If you have these symptoms, call 911 or go to the emergency room. In this emergency situation, treatment focuses on quickly lowering elevated potassium levels.

Chronic Hyperkalemia

People like Gary who have an ongoing risk of recurrent hyperkalemia should speak to a doctor about the various options to manage potassium levels. It’s impor-

tant you tell your doctor about all the medicines you are taking including over-the-counter drugs, herbals and supplements. Your doctor will determine what treatment is right for you. To help keep your potassium levels within normal range, your doctor may recommend the following:

✓ Following a low-potassium diet, if needed. Ask your healthcare provider or dietitian how much potassium in your diet is right for you. A dietitian can help you create a meal plan that gives you the right amount of dietary potassium to meet your needs.

✓ Try avoiding certain salt substitutes as they are high in potassium.

✓ Avoiding herbal remedies or supplements as they may have ingredients that can raise potassium levels. If you have any questions about them, ask your healthcare provider.

✓ Taking water pills (diuretics) or potassium binders, as directed by your healthcare provider. These medicines can help remove extra potassium from the body and keep it from coming back.

✓ Potassium is normally removed through urine. Water pills help rid your body of extra potassium by making your kidneys create more urine.

✓ Potassium binders often come in the form of a powder. They are mixed with a small amount of water and taken with food. When swallowed, they “bind” to the extra potassium in the bowels and remove it.

✓ Following your treatment plan carefully if you have diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease, or any other serious condition. This will help keep your potassium levels in the healthy range.

Learn more

Since Gary was diagnosed with hyperkalemia, he has made it his mission to educate people about the hidden dangers of high blood potassium levels. Gary has become a member of the National Kidney Foundation’s Kidney Advocacy Committee, a group of kidney disease patients advocating for other kidney patients and educating others about early detection.

Learn more from the National Kidney Foundation at www.kidney.org/atoz/content/what-hyperkalemia.