

Hypokalemia

Hypokalemia exists when the blood contains an abnormally low level of potassium. Potassium is an electrolyte that maintains the electrical charges throughout the body's membranes. Electrolytes are chemical substances or chemical compounds that generate electrical charges when they dissolve in liquids. If the blood potassium level falls below normal levels, the body's cells may not function normally. This can affect heart function. It can also damage muscle function.

Hypokalemia can be caused by:

- Prolonged loss of body liquids due to vomiting or diarrhea.
- Diuretics that are used to treat hypertension or heart failure.
- Hormone imbalances that affect metabolism.
- Diseases affecting the kidneys' ability to regulate potassium (for example, diabetes).

Symptoms

The symptoms of hypokalemia are:

- Weakness and paralysis.
- Muscle cramps.
- Low blood pressure.
- Fast and irregular heart beats.

Low potassium levels in those patients who take digitalis can cause serious problems in heart rhythm. You must report your symptoms to the doctor, especially muscle symptoms and changes in heart rhythm. The doctor will perform a physical examination on you and will carry out lab tests to determine the potassium level.

Treatment

The doctor will try to determine the cause of the problem and treat it, if possible. The doctor may order you to modify your diet. Mild hypokalemia can be improved by including more foods containing potassium in the diet; for example, orange juice, bananas, melon, carrots and tomato juice.

Medications containing potassium supplements may be prescribed to treat the problem.