

Hemodialysis and Your Diet

Last Updated: August 28, 2024

Medically reviewed by NKF Patient Education Team

Diet is a key part of your hemodialysis treatment. You may need to limit fluids and change your intake of some foods and condiments.



About Hemodialysis

At the point of hemodialysis, your body is more nourished. You will need to follow your dialysis diet.

- Your lab test results
- How much fluid you can drink
- Your hemodialysis limits on fluid and protein
- Your nutrition
 - Healthy amount of protein
 - Healthy weight gain (gaining 1 to 2 pounds a week)
 - Healthy blood levels of a protein called albumin. Albumin is a type of protein in your blood. If the albumin level is too low, it may mean you are not eating enough protein or calories.
 - Healthy blood levels of other nutrition-related labs such as vitamins and minerals

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The Basics of Good Nutrition on Hemodialysis

When you're on hemodialysis, you usually need to:

- Eat more high protein foods

- Eat less foods high in sodium and salt
- Eat less potassium
- Eat less phosphorus
- Drink and eat less fluid, including coffee, tea, water, soup, and any food that is liquid at room temperature

These diet changes are usually needed more for people who dialyze in-center three times per week. If you do frequent daily or nocturnal home hemodialysis, there will likely be fewer limits on food and fluid intake.

The Reasons

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How to Feed Yourself

Your kidney dietitian will show you how to:

- Read nutrition facts labels on foods
- Make the best food choices
- Measure your fluid intake
- Take the right nutrition supplements

Your dietitian will also make a diet plan that fits your needs based on the foods and drinks that you like. Your dietitian may also work with your social worker if you are having trouble paying for or finding the foods you need.

Nutrients

The next sections below describe the nutrients that need extra attention when you're on hemodialysis. All nutrients are important, but eating the right amount of these nutrients will help you feel better on hemodialysis.

Protein

People on hemodialysis need more protein than people without kidney disease. Extra protein helps you heal faster, and it's important for muscle health. Eat protein at every meal, including meat, fish, eggs, beans, and dairy products.

 Blood vessels, wounds, and skin may benefit from extra protein.

Sodium

For people on hemodialysis, sodium intake is limited. This means a low-sodium diet is recommended. Limit sodium when eating processed foods like chips. Less salt in your diet helps reduce swelling.

Use less salt. If you have high blood pressure, limit sodium intake even more. Avoid processed foods and packaged meals.

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Potassium

Limits on potassium are common for people on hemodialysis. To keep your potassium levels in check, discuss options with your dietitian.

Limit potassium-rich foods like bananas, avocados, and tomatoes. If you have high potassium levels, your dietitian may recommend potassium binders.

The potassium from meat and dairy products is absorbed more easily than from fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, and seeds. So a plant-based diet is possible when you're on hemodialysis. However, you may need to limit portion sizes of certain plant-based foods when your potassium levels are very high. Avoid foods with additives like acesulfame potassium and potassium sorbate, as they are easily absorbed. Do not use salt substitutes that contain potassium.

When potassium in the blood is too high or too low this can cause heart problems and even death. Therefore, it's very important to keep track of your potassium levels. Potassium binders are medications that can lower your potassium levels, and they may make it possible to add more foods to your diet. Your healthcare team can also adjust the dialysate (the cleansing fluid used during dialysis) to help lower your potassium.

Phosphorus

Phosphorus levels in the blood can become too high in kidney failure. Hemodialysis does not effectively remove phosphorus. This leads to weak bones and phosphorus binding with calcium to settle into blood vessels and the heart. Therefore, you may need to limit phosphorus in your diet, depending on your lab results. The best way to improve your diet overall and to decrease your phosphorus load is to avoid processed foods. Check labels for additives with PHOS, such as disodium phosphate. Phosphate additives are inorganic and are much more easily absorbed. Plant-based foods with organic phosphates like nuts and seeds are absorbed less. Animal-based foods like meat and dairy products have inorganic phosphates that are more easily absorbed. Therefore, eating more plant-based healthy foods instead of processed foods will decrease the phosphorus load.

Phosphorus binders and phosphorus blockers are medications that also lower your phosphorus levels, and they may make it possible to add more foods to your diet.

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Calories

Calories give you energy from all the foods you eat and beverages you drink. The number of calories you should have are based on individual needs and your dietitian will work with you to determine the right number for you. Age, weight, height, sex, exercise level, and other factors are considered. An important goal is to get your calories from nutrient-dense foods, which means foods that have a lot of healthy nutrients for the number of calories you take in. For example, you will get a lot of healthy nutrients from a fruit rather than a candy bar, and most likely the candy bar will add more calories that are less healthy because it has more sugar and fat.

Vitamins and Minerals

Vitamin and mineral needs are also specific to each person. Eating a wide variety of foods gives your body the vitamins and minerals it needs each day. In addition to a good diet, your healthcare

professional may order special vitamin and mineral supplements. Kidney disease and dialysis change the amounts of vitamins and minerals your body needs. Also, your special diet may limit some food groups that would normally provide important vitamins and minerals. Take only those supplements ordered by your kidney healthcare professional, since certain vitamins and minerals can be harmful if you are on dialysis. Also, check with your healthcare professional before using any herbal remedies or any other type of dietary supplement, as some of these may be harmful for people with kidney disease.

Additional Considerations and Your Kidney Dietitian

As is true for all people, the diet for people on hemodialysis should be heart healthy. This means limiting many foods that are high in sodium, potassium, phosphorus, and protein. These foods include red meat, organ meats like liver, processed meats like bacon and ham, and high-protein foods like beans, lentils, and nuts. If you work a job that involves physical exertion, you may need to limit fluids as well. It's important to follow a diet that is tailored to your individual needs and goals.

Metabolic acidosis is a common problem for people on hemodialysis. It occurs when there is too much acid in the blood. This can lead to fatigue, muscle weakness, and confusion. There are several ways to treat metabolic acidosis, including diet changes, medications, and dialysis.

If you're losing weight, it's important to make sure you're getting enough nutrition. This can be challenging if you're not eating well or if you're not able to eat much due to nausea or vomiting.

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Question

- How often do I need to go to dialysis?
- What can I do to improve my diet so I can feel better on hemodialysis?
- Am I gaining too much water weight between my hemodialysis treatments?
- Do I need a nutritional supplement?

More resources

- Nutrition and Hemodialysis
- 6 Kidney Disease Diet Myths

- Managing Fluid as A CKD Patient
- PLANT-BASED DIETS: KIDNEY FAILURE AND KIDNEY TRANSPLANT
- If You Need to Limit Potassium
- If You Need to Limit Phosphorus
- If You Need to Limit Sodium

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