Everything you need to know about potassium deficiency and its health implications

New Delhi, April 01, 2017: Many a times we suffer from common medical conditions, which we can’t pinpoint an exact reason for. Often a simple deficiency can trigger these. For instance potassium deficiency can cause muscle cramps, diarrhea, dehydration, nausea, vomiting, heart rhythm disorders, and even congestive heart failure.

Potassium is a mineral (electrolyte) in the body. Almost 98% of potassium is found inside the cells. Small changes in the level of potassium that is present outside the cells can have severe effects on the heart, nerves, and muscles.

Potassium helps maintain bodily functions. For instance muscles need potassium to contract. One of the most crucial roles played by potassium is helping the heart muscle to beat properly and regulate blood pressure. Low potassium can occur for many reasons including the use of water pills (diuretics), diarrhea, anorexia, bulimia, alcoholism, use of insulin and chronic laxative abuse. Women are at higher risk of developing hypokalemia caused due to potassium deficiency.

The kidney is the main organ that controls the balance of potassium by removing excess potassium into the urine. When potassium levels are low (hypokalemia), you can become weak, as cellular processes are impaired. The normal potassium level is 3.5-5.0 mEq/L. Low potassium is defined as a potassium level below 3.5 mEq/L.

Padma Shri Awardee Dr K K Aggarwal, National President Indian Medical Association (IMA) and President Heart Care Foundation of India (HCFI) and Dr RN Tandon – Honorary Secretary General IMA in a joint statement said that, “Typically people who are potassium deficient experience mild symptoms. These may include those relating to the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, kidneys, muscles, heart, and nerves. Other symptoms include nausea, bloating, constipation, palpitation, feeling increasingly thirsty, weakness, cramping in arm or leg muscles amongst others. If any of the above symptoms are noticed and unrelated to any other condition it is important to medical advice. Without symptoms, low potassium levels are only diagnosed through a routine blood test or an ECG. Preventive health check-ups are thus crucial for all”.

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Those suffering from low potassium levels should avoid long, strenuous physical activities because loss of potassium occurs with sweating. If dietary supplements, diuretics (water pills), or laxatives are responsible for the low potassium levels, they must be stopped immediately. Treatment for potassium deficiency begins after lab tests confirm the diagnosis. Those suffering from it need to be placed on a cardiac monitor and have an IV started. Usually, those with mild or moderately low potassium levels (2.5-3.5 mEq/L), who have no symptoms, or who have only minor complaints only need to be treated with potassium given in pill or liquid form.

A change in diet is advised for those with high risk of potassium deficiency. Examples of foods high in potassium include:

- Bananas
- Tomatoes
- Oranges
- Cantaloupes
- Peaches

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**About IMA:** Indian Medical Association is the only representative, national voluntary organization of Doctors of Modern Scientific System of Medicine, which looks after the interest of doctors as well as the well being of the community at large. It has its Headquarter in Delhi and State / Terr. Branches in 30 States and Union Territories. It has over 2, 60,000 doctors as its members through more than 1765 active local branches spread across the country.

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