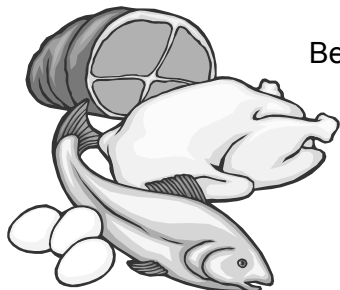


# Albumin: Why is it Important?

**I**n monthly lab reviews, dialysis patients may be told that their albumin level is low and they need to eat more protein. But what is albumin? Why is an albumin blood test important? What factors affect albumin? How can albumin levels be improved?



## What is albumin?

Albumin is a major protein found in the blood. Protein plays a big role in fighting off infections and building or repairing muscle tissue. When a person does not eat enough calories or protein, the liver doesn't have enough protein to make new albumin, which causes lower albumin levels in the blood. Research has shown that patients with low albumin levels over time have a higher death risk. Testing albumin levels helps assess a person's nutritional status and risk for malnutrition.

## What is a good level for albumin?

The optimal level for albumin is 4.0 gm/dL. This may vary slightly between laboratories and the method the lab uses to process the blood sample. Check with your unit's renal dietitian to see what your goal for albumin should be.

## What other factors can affect albumin levels?

Albumin is slow to change. It can also be affected by a number of other health conditions. It can be low in

persons with a history of:

- liver disease
- kidney disease
- infections

Because it is hard to tell exactly what has caused the decrease, the healthcare team will use the albumin test along with other tools to monitor continued health. The dietitian will often ask about appetite, monitor weight and muscle tone, and review other blood tests including those that measure adequate dialysis (KT/V and URR).

## How much protein should patients eat to stay healthy?

Most people on hemodialysis should try for a goal of 8-10 ounces of protein each day, or 10-12 ounces for those on peritoneal dialysis. Check with your dietitian for your specific protein goal. An easy way to estimate your protein intake is to compare your portion size to the following objects:

- a deck of cards is equal to 3 ounces of protein (so eat 2 decks)
- a paperback book is equal to 8 ounces of protein

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## TIPS...

- At each meal try to include a good size portion of high quality protein food: chicken, turkey, fish, beef, pork, or eggs. Egg or tuna salad on crackers makes a good snack.
- Notify your dietitian ASAP if you are experiencing nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, difficulty chewing and swallowing, or lack of appetite.
- If your albumin is less than 3.8 ask your dietitian to assess what is going on. They may suggest;
  - Eating 5-6 small meals a day
  - New recipes that include meat, fish, poultry, or eggs
  - Possibly a protein drink or bar that would be right for you.
- If you need help making meals, check with your social worker for options such as meals on wheels
- If diet changes or supplements don't help, speak with your physician. An appetite stimulant or a zinc supplement may be helpful.