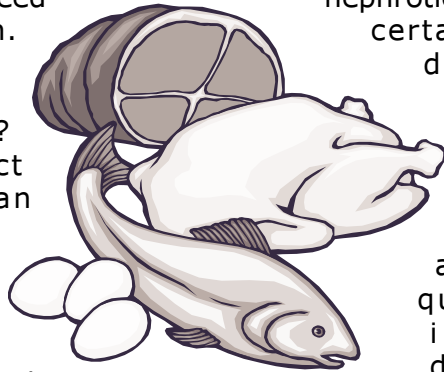


# Albumin: Why is it Important?

Lauren Maister-Green, RD; Alisha Chasey, MS, RD; Beth Spanier, RD; Meredith Gilliatt-Wimberly, MS, RD

**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 normal range for albumin is 3.5-5.5 g/dL (optimal level 4.0 g/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 a valuable test but it 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, since albumin is made in the liver. It can also be low in persons with a history of nephrotic syndrome or certain kidney diseases that cause protein to be lost in the urine. Albumin levels can also drop quickly if an infection develops.

Because it is hard to tell exactly what has caused the decrease, a health care 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 match box is equal to 1 oz. of protein, a deck of cards is equal to 3 oz. of protein, and a paperback book is equal to 8 oz of protein.

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## TIPS . . .

- At each meal try to include one of these high quality protein foods: chicken, turkey, fish, beef, pork, or eggs.
- Notify your dietitian ASAP if you are experiencing nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, difficulty chewing and swallowing, or lack of appetite.
- Eat protein snacks, such as an egg salad sandwich or tuna on crackers.
- Check w/ your dietician about a protein drink, powder, or bar that would be right for you.
- Try to eat 5-6 small meals a day.
- Try new recipes that include protein. Ask your dietitian for suggestions.
- If you need help making meals, check with your social worker for options such as Meals on Wheels.
- Try a protein supplement. Speak with your dietitian to find the one that would be best for you.
- If diet changes or supplements don't help, speak with your physician. An appetite stimulant or zinc supplement may be helpful.