



Chronic Kidney Disease Information for Members

What is Chronic Kidney Disease?

Having chronic kidney disease means that your kidneys are not working the way they should. Your kidneys have the important job of filtering your blood. They remove waste products and extra fluid and flush them from your body as urine. When your kidneys do not work right, wastes build up in your blood and make you sick.

Chronic kidney disease may seem to have happened suddenly. But it has been happening bit by bit for many years as a result of damage to your kidneys.

Each of your kidneys has about a million tiny filters. If these nephrons are damaged, they stop working. For a while, healthy nephrons can do the extra work. But if the damage continues, more and more nephrons stop working. At some point, the nephrons that are left cannot filter your blood well enough to keep you healthy.

There are things you can do to slow or stop the damage to your kidneys. Taking medicines and making some lifestyle changes can help you manage your disease and feel better.

Chronic kidney disease is also called chronic renal failure or chronic renal insufficiency.

What Causes Chronic Kidney Disease?

Chronic kidney disease is caused by damage to the kidneys. The most common causes of this damage are:

- High blood pressure
- High blood sugar (diabetes)

Other things that can lead to chronic kidney disease include:

- Kidney diseases and infections, such as polycystic kidney disease, pyelonephritis, and glomerulonephritis, or a kidney problem you were born with
- A narrowed or blocked renal artery—the renal artery carries blood to the kidneys
- An enlarged prostate gland, kidney stones, or a tumor that keeps urine from flowing out of the kidneys
- Lead poisoning
- Long-term use of medicines that can damage the kidneys—examples include nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen (Advil) or celecoxib (Celebrex), acetaminophen (Tylenol), and certain antibiotics

What are the Symptoms?

How well your kidneys work is called kidney function. As your kidney function gets worse, you may have these symptoms:

- Urinate less than normal
- Have swelling from fluid buildup in your tissues—called edema ("ih-DEE-muh")

- Feel very tired or sleepy
- Not feel hungry, or you may lose weight without trying

- Often feel sick to your stomach (nauseated) or vomit
- Have trouble sleeping
- Have headaches or trouble thinking clearly
- Have anemia

You may start to have symptoms only a few months after your kidneys begin to fail. But most people do not have symptoms then. In fact, many do not have symptoms for 30 years or more. This is called the "silent" phase of the disease.

How is Chronic Kidney Disease Diagnosed?

Your doctor will do blood and urine tests to help find out how well your kidneys are working. These tests can show signs of kidney disease and anemia. You may have other tests to help rule out other problems that could cause your symptoms.

Your doctor will ask questions about any past kidney problems. He/she will ask if you have a family history of kidney disease. He/she will also ask what medicines you take—both prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

You may have a test that lets your doctor look at a picture of your kidneys. That could be an ultrasound or CT scan. These tests can help your doctor measure the size of your kidneys. The tests estimate blood flow. They can tell if urine flow is blocked. In some cases, your doctor may take a tiny sample of kidney tissue. This biopsy helps find out what is causing your kidney disease.

How is it Treated?

Chronic kidney disease is usually caused by another condition. So the first step is to treat the disease causing the damage.

Diabetes and high blood pressure cause most cases of the disease. If you keep your blood pressure and blood sugar near normal levels, you may be able to slow or stop the kidney damage. Losing weight and getting more exercise can help. You may also need to take medicines.

Kidney disease is a complex problem. You will probably need to take a number of medicines and have many tests. To stay as healthy as possible, work closely with your doctor. Go to all your appointments. Take your medicines just the way your doctor says to.

Lifestyle changes are an important part of your treatment. Taking these steps can help slow down kidney disease and reduce your symptoms. They may also help with high blood pressure, diabetes, and other problems that make kidney disease worse.

- Follow a diet that is easy on your kidneys. A dietitian can help you make an eating plan with the right amounts of salt (sodium) and protein.
- You may also need to watch how much fluid you drink each day.
- Get some exercise every day. Work with your doctor to design an exercise program that is right for you.
- Do not smoke or use tobacco.
- Do not drink alcohol.

Always talk to your doctor before you take **any** new medicine. That includes over-the-counter remedies, prescription drugs, vitamins, or herbs. Some of these can hurt your kidneys.

What Happens if my Kidney Disease Gets Worse?

When kidney function is very poor, it is called kidney failure. Kidney failure affects your whole body. It can cause serious heart, bone, and brain problems. It can make you feel very ill.

If you have kidney failure, you will probably have two choices. You can start dialysis or get a new kidney (transplant). Both of these treatments have risks and benefits. Talk with your doctor to decide which would be best for you.

- Dialysis is a way to have a machine filter your blood when your kidneys no longer can. It is not a cure. But it can help you feel better and live longer.
- Kidney transplant may be the best choice if you are healthy in other ways. With a new kidney, you will feel much better. And you'll be able to live a more normal life. But you may have to wait for a kidney that is a good match for your blood and tissue type. And you will have to take medicine for the rest of your life. This is to keep your body from rejecting the new kidney.

Making treatment decisions when you are very ill is hard. It is normal to be worried and afraid. Discuss your concerns with your loved ones and your doctor. It may help to visit a dialysis or transplant center. You can also talk to others who have made these choices.

References

Healthwise, Incorporated. Chronic Kidney Disease. Author: Jeanette Curtis. Medical Review: E. Gregory Thompson, MD (Internal Medicine), D.C. Mendelssohn, MD, FRCPC (Nephrology). November 13, 2007.

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