**10 Symptoms of Kidney Disease** Life Options: Medical Education Institute

Many people who have chronic kidney disease don't know it because the early signs can be very subtle. It can take many years to go from chronic kidney disease (CKD) to kidney failure. *Most people with CKD live out their lives without ever reaching kidney failure*. **People with stage 3 CKD have about an 80% chance of never having their kidneys fail.**

At any stage of kidney disease, knowledge is power. Knowing the symptoms of kidney disease can help you get the treatment you need to feel your best. If you or someone you know has one or more of the following symptoms of CKD, or you worry about kidney problems, see a doctor for blood and urine tests. Remember, *many of the symptoms can be caused by other health problems*. **The only way to know the cause of YOUR symptoms is to see your doctor.**

**Symptom 1: Changes in Urination** Kidneys make urine, so when the kidneys are failing, the urine may change. How?

* You may have to get up at night to urinate.
* Urine may be foamy or bubbly.
* You may urinate *more* often, or in *greater amounts* than usual, with pale urine.
* You may urinate *less* often, or in *smaller amounts* than usual, with dark-colored urine.
* Your urine may contain blood.
* You may feel pressure or have difficulty urinating.

**What patients said:** "When you go to use the restroom, you couldn't get it all out. And it would still feel just like tightness down there, there was so much pressure."

"My urine is what I had started noticing. Then I was frequently going to the bathroom, and when I got there, nothing's happening. You think, 'Hey, I've got to go to the john,' and you get there: 2, 3 drops."

"I was passing blood in my urine. It was so dark it looked like grape Kool-Aid. And when I went to the hospital they thought I was lying about what color it was."

**Symptom 2: Swelling** Failing kidneys don't remove extra fluid, which builds up in your body causing swelling in the legs, ankles, feet, face, and/or hands.

**What patients said:** "I remember a lot of swelling in my ankles. My ankles were so big I couldn't get my shoes on."

"My sister, her hair started to fall out, she was losing weight, but her face was really puffy, you know, and everything like that, before she found out what was going on with her."

"Going to work one morning, my left ankle was swollen, real swollen, and I was very exhausted just walking to the bus stop. And I knew then that I had to see a doctor."

**Symptom 3: Fatigue** Healthy kidneys make a hormone called *erythropoietin* (a-rith'-ro-po'-uh-tin), or EPO, that tells your body to make oxygen-carrying red blood cells. As the kidneys fail, they make less EPO. With fewer red blood cells to carry oxygen, your muscles and brain tire very quickly. This is *anemia*, and it can be treated.

**What patients said:** "I was constantly exhausted and didn't have any pep or anything."

"I would sleep a lot. I'd come home from work and get right in that bed."

"It's just like when you're extremely tired all the time. Fatigued, and you're just drained, even if you didn't do anything, just totally drained."

**Symptom 4: Skin Rash/Itching** Kidneys remove wastes from the bloodstream. When the kidneys fail, the build-up of wastes in your blood can cause severe itching.

**What patients said:** "It's not really a skin itch or anything, it's just right down to the bone. I had to get a brush and dig. My back was just bloody from scratching it so much."

"My skin had broke out, I was itching and scratching a lot."

**Symptom 5: Metallic Taste in Mouth/Ammonia Breath** A build-up of wastes in the blood (called *uremia*) can make food taste different and cause bad breath. You may also notice that you stop liking to eat meat, or that you are losing weight because you just don't feel like eating.

**What patients said:** "Foul taste in your mouth. Almost like you're drinking iron."

"You don't have the appetite you used to have."

"Before I started dialysis, I must have lost around about 10 pounds."

**Symptom 6: Nausea and Vomiting** A severe build-up of wastes in the blood (*uremia*) can also cause nausea and vomiting. Loss of appetite can lead to weight loss.

**What patients said:** "I had a lot of itching, and I was nauseated, throwing up all the time. I couldn't keep anything down in my stomach."

"When I got the nausea, I couldn't eat and I had a hard time taking my blood pressure pills."

**Symptom 7: Shortness of Breath** Trouble catching your breath can be related to the kidneys in two ways. First, extra fluid in the body can build up in the lungs. And second, *anemia* (a shortage of oxygen-carrying red blood cells) can leave your body oxygen-starved and short of breath.

**What patients said:** "At the times when I get the shortness of breath, it's alarming to me. It just fears me. I think maybe I might fall or something so I usually go sit down for awhile."

"I couldn't sleep at night. I couldn't catch my breath, like I was drowning or something. And, the bloating, can't breathe, can't walk anywhere. It was bad."

"You go up a set of stairs and you're out of breath, or you do work and you get tired and you have to stop."

**Symptom 8: Feeling Cold** Anemia can make you feel cold all the time, even in a warm room.

**What patients said:** "I notice sometimes I get really cold, I get chills."

"Sometimes I get really, really cold. It could be hot, and I'd be cold."

**Symptom 9: Dizziness and Trouble Concentrating** Anemia related to kidney failure means that your brain is not getting enough oxygen. This can lead to memory problems, trouble with concentration, and dizziness.

**What patients said:** "I know I mentioned to my wife that my memory—I couldn't remember what I did last week, or maybe what I had 2 days ago. I couldn't really concentrate, because I like to work crossword puzzles and read a lot."

"I was always tired and dizzy."

"It got to the point, like, I used to be at work, and all of the sudden I'd start getting dizzy. So I was thinking maybe it was my blood pressure or else diabetes was going bad. That's what was on my mind."

**Symptom 10: Leg/Flank Pain** The most common causes of CKD do not cause any pain. And, much of the pain that is near the kidneys is *not* caused by a kidney problem. But some people who have CKD do have pain.Some people with kidney problems may have pain in the *upper* back (where the kidneys are) or on the same side as the affected kidney.

* **Polycystic kidney disease (PKD)**, which causes large, fluid-filled cysts on the kidneys and sometimes the liver, can cause pain.
* **Kidney infections and kidney stones** can cause severe pain, often in spasms.
* **Bladder infections** can cause burning when you urinate.
* People who have **medullary sponge kidney** say it is painful.

**What patients said:** "About 2 years ago, I was constantly going to the bathroom all the time, my back was always hurting and I was wondering why...and they diagnosed that kidney problem."

"And then you're having to get up all time through the night, and then you have the side ache, a backache, and you can't move."

"At night, I would get a pain in my side. It was worse than labor pain. And I'd be crying and my husband would get up, everybody, rubbing my legs."

**Frequently-Asked Questions about CK**

What are you doing to manage your kidney disease? When people are told they have chronic kidney disease (CKD), the first questions they often have are "How long will I live?" and "How well will I live?" This section answers these and other questions about CKD, while also presenting thoughts from patients.

**Q: How long can I live with chronic kidney disease?**

**A:** Many people think that if their kidneys fail, they will die. Right away. This used to be true—50 years ago. Back then, there were not enough dialysis machines to go around and medical knowledge about kidney disease was limited. It is no longer true today. How long you can live with CKD depends on your age, other health problems, and *how involved you become in your care*. Most people with early CKD will never have kidney failure. Others will reach kidney failure and may live for decades with dialysis or kidney transplants.

There are major advances in today's healthcare. We have better drugs, know more about how to slow down kidney failure, and have updated dialysis machines. But the most important factor is still the person who has the disease. Research shows that people who become partners in their care live longer. So, ask questions, and explore with your doctor and care team the best way for you to help manage your disease.

**Q: How good will my life be with CKD?**

**A:** How good your life can be with CKD depends on YOU! In the early stages, CKD may have symptoms that are so subtle you may not even notice them. In later stages, fatigue, itching, loss of appetite, and other symptoms can reduce your quality of life—if you don't act. How? All of these symptoms can be treated. Learn what to watch for and tell your doctor, so you can get the help you need. You can also keep a good quality of life by following your treatment plan. For example, taking your medications in the right doses at the right times may help slow your kidney disease. Your quality of life with CKD depends on your attitude, and how you accept the changes and take control of your health and your life.

**Q: Can I still have a good life if I need dialysis?**

**A:** Yes, you can live long and live *well* with dialysis. Many people—even those with loved ones on dialysis—don't know that there are many types of dialysis. You can [choose a treatment](http://kidneyschool.org/m02/) that lets you keep doing all or most of the things you value.

People who are very sick *before* they start dialysis are often surprised to find that they feel much better a few weeks or months later. The unknown you imagine is often much scarier than the reality. Learn all you can, and talk to people who are doing well—like people who do their treatments at home, or while they sleep. You'll see that you can have a good life on dialysis.

**Q: I'm tired all the time. Is there a treatment for fatigue?**

**A:** Even healthy people complain of being tired. But people with CKD can be so exhausted that they fall asleep during the day—even after 8 to 10 hours of sleep at night. One reason for fatigue can be anemia, a shortage of oxygen-carrying red blood cells. People with CKD often have *anemia* because damaged kidneys make less of a hormone called *erythropoietin* (epoetin, or EPO). EPO tells the bone marrow to make new red blood cells. Without a fresh supply of red blood cells, the body has less oxygen. This makes you more tired and cold, and less able to focus and fight disease. If your fatigue is due to anemia, your doctor may prescribe iron and injections of a man-made form of EPO.

**Q: How can I keep my kidneys working as long as possible?**

**A:** There are a number of treatments, including medications and lifestyle changes, that may help keep your kidneys working longer. People can even get transplants *before* having dialysis, especially if they have a willing living donor. Ask your doctor what would help *you*. To learn more about possible treatments, see [Chronic Kidney Disease: What *You* Can Do](http://lifeoptions.org/kidneyinfo/ckdinfo.php?page=5).

**Q: Should I keep working?**

**A:** Yes! Most people find that disability pays much less than working—but their bills don't go away just because they're ill. If you have CKD and a job, try to keep it if you can, or find a new one. Work can make you feel like you're still *you*, and that you are still helping to support your family. Work may also be a vital part of your social life. If your job comes with a health plan, it can also help you get good care and pay for prescription drugs.

If you find that you feel too tired to work, see your doctor! Fatigue can be caused by anemia, which can be treated. Ask your employer if you need an *accommodation*—more breaks, a different shift time, or energy-saving devices to keep your job. You can find helpful information about employment support programs, laws, and resources to help people with disabilities on the [Social Security website](http://www.socialsecurity.gov/work/index.html).

**Q: What questions should I ask my doctor?**

**A:** No two people are alike. Asking questions is the best way to find out about your health. On this Life Options website, you can download a [*Patient Interest Checklist*](http://lifeoptions.org/catalog/catalog.php?prodCat=teachingTools#checklists) that will help you figure out what to ask.

You'll also find a few basic ideas below, and you can add your own. If you write your questions and show the list to your doctor, you may be more likely to get them answered. Write down the answers, too—or have someone come along to help you remember the answers.

1. What percent of kidney function do I have now?
2. What is the cause of my kidney problem?
3. What are my lab test results right now?
4. What can I do to keep my kidneys working as long as possible?
5. What treatment can I get for my symptoms? (List symptoms)
6. What are the next steps for my treatment?
7. Will I need dialysis or a transplant? If so, how long might it be until I do?

**Q: Where can I find out more information about chronic kidney disease?**

**A:** Asking questions and getting them answered—by a healthcare professional or in a book or other reliable source—is a key part of doing well with *any* chronic disease. Here are some thoughts:

* Ask your care team to teach you about your condition and to give you any information they have. Never feel shy about coming to a clinic visit with a list of questions—and write down the answers.
* Visit the Medical Education Institute's FREE [Kidney School](http://kidneyschool.org/)—16 modules of self-paced learning on kidney topics from nutrition to anemia to lab tests and much more.
* At this Life Options website, we have a long list of [kidney links](http://lifeoptions.org/links/) and many [booklets](http://lifeoptions.org/catalog/catalog.php?prodCat=booklets) and [fact sheets](http://lifeoptions.org/catalog/catalog.php?prodCat=teachingTools) about kidney disease that you can read or download.
* The library is another option.
* Visit the [National Kidney Foundation](http://www.kidney.org/) (NKF)
* Join the [American Association of Kidney Patients](http://www.aakp.org/) (AAKP)
* Learn more about transplant from the [United Network for Organ Sharing](http://www.unos.org/) (UNOS)
* Depending on the cause of your kidney problem, there may be another organization to help you—type your diagnosis into Google to learn more.

**What *You* Can D**

What are you doing to manage your kidney disease? *"The more informed I was, the better I felt about it. I felt I had some control."* - CKD patient

Most chronic kidney disease (CKD) can't be cured. The good news is that if your doctor finds out that you have a kidney problem, there may be a number of ways to help slow down the disease, help you feel better, and help you make better medical decisions. What can *you* do?

**Know Your Lab Tests** Learn the names of the lab tests your doctor orders and what the results mean. Kidney disease is often diagnosed, and always monitored, by measuring levels of substances in the blood or urine. Knowing—and tracking—your lab tests is an important way for you to be involved in your care. Normal lab test ranges vary slightly from one laboratory to another. When you get your results, be sure to ask what the laboratory's normal range is. Measures of [kidney function](http://lifeoptions.org/kidneyinfo/labvalues.php#kidneyfunction)

* Measures of [anemia](http://lifeoptions.org/kidneyinfo/labvalues.php#anemia)
* Measures of [diabetes control](http://lifeoptions.org/kidneyinfo/labvalues.php#diabetes)
* Measures of [nutrition](http://lifeoptions.org/kidneyinfo/labvalues.php#nutrition)

**Control Your Blood Pressure** Keep your blood pressure at the target level your doctor sets with:

* Weight loss
* Exercise
* A low-sodium diet
* Reducing stress
* Taking your blood pressure medication the right way

**Ask Your Doctor About Certain Medications That May Help Treat Kidney Disease**

Angiotensin converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors are a class of blood pressure medicines that can protect kidney function in some cases (generic names include ramipril, captopril, and enalapril). In some people, ACE inhibitors cause a cough, which stops when you stop taking the drug. Angiotensin receptor blockers (ARBs) may be used along with or instead of ACE inhibitors. There may be drugs that treat the kidney problem YOU have, too. Fish oil has been found to help some types of kidney problem. Drugs that suppress the immune system may help some autoimmune causes of CKD.

**Ask Your Doctor About Anemia**

A shortage of red blood cells can start early in CKD. Anemia can cause you to feel tired and worn out. Ask your doctor about medications such as epoetin (EPO) and iron to treat anemia.

**Eat a Healthy Diet** We *literally* are what we eat—we build our cells out of our food. So, if you eat mostly fast food and drink sugary sodas, you may be able to improve your kidney health by eating better foods. Studies have found that eating *more* fresh vegetables, fruit\*, and low fat dairy and less saturated fat, starches, and sweets may help slow CKD.

**\*NOTE:** Dried fruits (e.g., raisins, prunes, apricots, etc.) and some fresh ones (like papaya, mango, avocado, bananas, and oranges) have a *lot* of potassium. If your kidneys don't work well, this could be dangerous for you. Talk to a dietitian about what is safe for you to eat.

**Ask Your Doctor About a Lower-Protein Diet** Some doctors believe a diet lower in some proteins can help slow kidney disease. Ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian who specializes in treating those with chronic kidney disease. A dietitian can help you learn how to keep your kidneys healthy longer by eating the right foods. Don't limit your protein until you have talked about it with your doctor or dietitian.

**Control Your Blood Sugar Levels** If you have diabetes, stay at a healthy weight, exercise, and take medications as prescribed to keep your blood glucose in the "normal" range. Tight control of blood sugar can help slow the progression of kidney disease. Your HbA1c levels, which measure your blood sugar control over a period of 3 months, should be less than 6.5%.

**Quit Smoking** In people with CKD, smoking is linked to an increase in the amount of protein spilled in the urine. In smokers with diabetes, CKD may progress *twice as fast*. Scientists are not sure why this is the case, but if you have kidney disease and you smoke, quitting may help slow down the damage.

**Avoid Certain Pain Medications** Some over-the-counter pain pills containing ibuprofen or naproxen, and even acetaminophen (e.g., Motrin®, Advil®, Aleve®, Tylenol®) can affect kidney function. This is especially true if you have kidney, heart, or liver disease or you take *diuretics* (water pills). Avoid using combinations of these pain pills and caffeine—both at once can further damage your kidneys. **Exercise** With your doctor's okay, start an exercise program to control weight and keep your heart and blood vessels healthy and your muscles and joints in good working order.Top of Form

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