

LOOKING AFTER YOUR KIDNEYS

Frequently asked questions about kidney disease

What do the kidneys do?

Kidneys are fist-sized organs found at the back of your body below your rib cage. Most people have two kidneys. The kidneys are important because they remove excess water and waste products from the body. Waste products are lost from the body in urine. As kidneys control water balance in the body they help to keep your blood pressure well-controlled.

My doctor or nurse tells me that I have kidney disease. What does this mean for me?

Around 10% of people in the UK have kidney disease. For most people it is mild, they do not have symptoms and it does not worsen with time. However for some people, kidney function can deteriorate. It is important you know how you can keep the kidneys working well and to recognise signs and symptoms which can be reported to your doctor or nurse.

My doctor tells me that I have only 50% kidney function – is this serious?

Kidney damage is measured by a blood test (called a serum creatinine). The higher your creatinine result, the more damaged your kidneys are. A normal creatinine value is no higher than between 100-130.

However, when you have this blood test taken, the hospital laboratory also report another result, called an estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR). This blood test will more accurately tell your doctor or nurse how your kidneys are functioning. The table below shows what the results of your blood test mean. The numbers below can be approximated to percent function, for example, a result of 30 means that your kidneys are only working 30%. It is usual for kidney function to get worse as you get older (approximately 1% drop each year after the age of 40 years).

Blood test result	What it means
More than 90	Early kidney damage
60-90	Mild kidney damage
30-59	Moderate kidney damage
15-29	Significant kidney damage which may mean you need to see a kidney specialist
Less than 15	Severe kidney failure which needs dialysis

What has caused my kidney disease?

Diabetes and high blood pressure are the main causes of kidney disease. Other reasons include long-term urine infections, but quite often it is not clear what has caused the kidney damage.

If I have mild or moderate kidney damage, what can I do to stop it getting worse?

There are lots of things you can do to help yourself:

- ▶ Make sure that you always turn up to your hospital or clinic appointments, particularly if your doctor or nurse has told you it is for a blood pressure check
- ▶ Ask what your blood pressure is when you have it measured. If you have known kidney disease then the target can be as low as 125 (top figure) over 75 (bottom figure). It may be helpful if you can buy your own blood pressure machine available from most chemists, so you can monitor your blood pressure at home
- ▶ Make sure you take your blood pressure tablets and report any side-effects if you feel unwell. There are lots of different alternatives to try if you get side-effects such as dizziness or a persistent cough.
- ▶ Diet: try not to add salt to food at the table and do not eat too many processed foods. Too much salt can raise your blood pressure.
- ▶ Try not to smoke and if you find this hard, seek advice on how to cut down. Smoking can harden the blood vessels in the kidneys and this can make the kidney damage worse.
- ▶ Try to exercise and keep your weight down. Your doctor or nurse will advise you on what is an ideal weight for your height
- ▶ Encourage members of your family to have their blood pressure checked

What symptoms may I have?

During the early stages of kidney disease (blood result above 60), you will not have any specific signs or symptoms. Later, symptoms may become more pronounced, but nevertheless vary from patient to patient. Some of the later common symptoms can include tiredness, water retention (swelling of legs, ankles, hands or puffy eyelids), loss of appetite and itchy skin.

What can I do if I have further questions?

In the first instance you can ask your GP or Practice Nurse. However there are many other sources of information available.

Website

National Kidney Federation: a UK charity run by kidney patients for kidney patients has many useful leaflets on kidney disease

<http://www.kidney.org.uk/>

Books

Living Well with Kidney Failure by Juliet Auer published in 2005

Send a cheque for £12.99 (made payable to Class Publishing) to: Class Publishing (Priority Service), FREEPOST, London W6 7BR or telephone 01256 302 699

Help! I've got kidney failure – your introduction to kidney failure and its treatment by Dr Rob Higgins published in 2005

For copies of this free booklet, please call the NKF Helpline on 0845 601 02 09