

Looking after yourself with kidney disease

Kidney disease is called a 'silent disease' as there are often no warning signs. You can lose up to **90 per cent** of your kidney function before getting any symptoms. To know if you have kidney disease, you need to ask your doctor for a **Kidney Health Check**.

90%

of kidney function can be lost without experiencing any symptoms

What is a Kidney Health Check?

A **Kidney Health Check** is a quick and simple way to identify kidney issues or monitor those with kidney disease. You can have a Kidney Health Check at your local health centre, often as part of a regular check-up. It includes three parts:



A blood pressure check

to see if you have high blood pressure. High blood pressure can damage your kidneys and kidney disease can cause your blood pressure to increase.

A urine test

to see how much albumin (protein) is present in your urine. Albumin in your urine is a sign of damage or scarring in the kidneys. This test is called urine-albumin creatinine ratio (uACR).

A **blood test** to check your kidney function. This test will measure how well your kidneys are filtering your blood and is called estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR).

Your doctor may ask you to repeat tests, based on the initial results, to exclude or confirm a diagnosis of chronic kidney disease.



Looking after yourself with kidney disease

The first signs of advancing kidney disease are usually general in nature and can include:



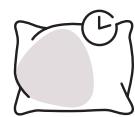
High blood pressure



Itchy skin



Frequent toileting at night



Fatigue



Going off your food



Restless legs



Blood in your urine



Feeling breathless



Nausea and vomiting



Bad breath



Metallic taste in your mouth

Looking after yourself with kidney disease can be done in various ways through managing any co-existing conditions (such as diabetes), looking after your wellbeing and overall health, following healthcare advice and taking any prescribed medication.



Manage co-existing conditions

Kidney disease is a complex condition, affected by many various elements and also affects many other health conditions. Looking after one condition, helps to look after the others.



Manage blood pressure

High blood pressure can cause kidney disease and kidney disease can cause high blood pressure.

Controlling your blood pressure can involve:

- making changes to your diet
- having regular blood pressure checks
- your doctor prescribing you one or more medications.

Managing your blood pressure will not only protect your kidneys, but it will also protect your heart and brain, reducing the risk of a heart attack or stroke.



Manage diabetes

If you have any type of diabetes (type 1, type 2 or gestational), keeping your sugar level under control also protects your kidneys.

Yearly **Kidney Health Checks** and careful control of your blood sugar will slow down any damage to your kidneys. This means you delay kidney problems and the need to start kidney replacement therapy, like dialysis.

Your wellbeing and health

Your overall health and wellbeing play an important role in your disease progression and risk of other diseases. Some things are in your control, and entirely up to you how you embark on lifestyle changes that support your health and wellbeing. These include your mental wellbeing, your activity, food, drink, weight, and smoking/vaping.



Wellbeing

Wellbeing refers to the state of being comfortable, healthy, and happy, encompassing both physical and mental aspects of life.

It's a broad concept that includes:

- **Physical wellbeing:** Maintaining good health through exercise, nutrition, sleep, and overall self-care.
- **Mental wellbeing:** A positive state of mind, which involves managing stress, building resilience, and cultivating a sense of purpose.
- **Social wellbeing:** Meaningful relationships and a strong sense of community.
- **Emotional wellbeing:** The ability to cope with emotions, both positive and negative, and maintain emotional balance.
- **Financial wellbeing:** Stability and security in managing finances, which reduces stress related to money.

Everyone places varying levels of importance on each of these elements of wellbeing and there is no right or wrong way of looking after your wellbeing.

If you have been diagnosed with kidney disease, it's normal to feel overwhelmed. Many people experience a range of emotions including frustration, despair, fear, a sense of lack of control and depression, especially if you require dialysis or a kidney transplant.



Anxiety is not limited to your diagnosis.

It's common to have good days and bad days throughout your kidney disease journey. For example, you may feel an onset of stress when you:

- notice changes day-to-day due to reduced kidney function
- progress to another stage of kidney disease
- start and undergo treatment.

The link between kidney disease and mental health goes both ways. Dealing with kidney disease can impact your mental health, and your mental health can affect how you handle kidney disease.

Scientists are studying how the kidneys and brain are connected to understand how kidney disease affects mental health. Some studies suggest that problems like dementia might be related to damage in the circulatory system, which affects both the kidneys and the brain.

People with severe CKD or kidney failure might find that their treatment makes their mental health worse.



Managing your emotional wellbeing

There are some things you can do to help yourself cope. Some emotions only last for a short time. It's OK to be angry, sad or fearful, or to cry, shout or withdraw occasionally. However, it's not OK for this to continue all the time.

Physical activity, a healthy diet, supporting others, hobbies and being involved in a community can help to keep your mind and body healthy. Talking with others who have had similar experiences may also help you, especially if they are now back in control of their lives and doing well.

A loved one or a trusted health professional can also provide support. Social workers and psychologists are trained to listen to your worries and help you find solutions. There is nothing wrong with asking your doctor for a referral.

Depression is an illness affecting **1 in 5** people with chronic kidney disease and **50%** of people on Dialysis. **For immediate help, you can contact beyondblue 1300 224 636.**

You can also visit **beyondblue.org.au** for further information on depression and anxiety.



Keep active

There are many benefits to regular exercise. Not only can it help to reduce and maintain weight, but it can also reduce the risk of developing **heart disease, diabetes, and kidney disease.**

Be active on most days, preferably every day.

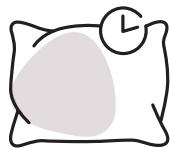
- Aim for 2.5 – 5 hours of moderate intensity activity across the week, or at a level that accounts for your physical health.
- Some activity is better than none.
- Include muscle strengthening activities as part of daily activity at least twice a week.

Doing any physical activity is better than doing none. If you do no physical activity right now, start by doing some, then slowly build up to the recommended amount.

Choose exercise that you enjoy. You don't need to sweat it out at the gym - a brisk walk is great.

Tips to get more exercise:

- Break up your 30 minutes of exercise into 3 x 10-minute sessions if time is limited.
- Get off the bus one or two stops earlier and walk the rest of the way, walk to the shop instead of driving there, park further away in the parking lot, and take the stairs instead of the lift or escalator.
- Invite a friend to exercise with you or join an exercise group - not only will you lose track of time as you exercise, but you'll also help to motivate and encourage each other.
- Simple daily activities such as mowing the lawn or walking around the shopping centre.
- Set a goal and attach a small reward for achieving it. Research shows that the brain is motivated by rewards and recognition, even if they are minor.



Sleep

Sleep serves multiple vital functions. It allows the body to repair and regenerate tissues, consolidate memories, and support cognitive functions like learning and problem-solving. Sleep also plays a crucial role in regulating emotions, mood, and overall mental wellbeing.

Managing healthy sleep is crucial for overall wellbeing.

Many things can help you have a better night's sleep. Most adults of all ages need 7-9 hours of sleep.

Tips for better sleep:

Create a sleep-friendly environment: Keep your bedroom dark, quiet, and cool. Use comfortable bedding and a supportive mattress.

Establish a consistent routine: Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on weekends. Develop a relaxing pre-sleep routine, like reading or meditating.

Mind your diet and

hydration: Avoid heavy meals, caffeine, and alcohol close to bedtime. Follow your kidney care team's advice on fluid intake to prevent night-time disruptions.

Address specific symptoms:

Manage issues like restless legs syndrome, itching, or pain with guidance from your healthcare provider. If you experience sleep apnoea, consult a specialist for treatment options.

Stay active during the day:

Regular exercise can improve sleep but avoid vigorous activity close to bedtime.

Limit screen time:

Avoid using electronic devices like phones or tablets at least an hour before bed, try reading a book before bed.

Incorporate relaxation techniques:

Try deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or imagine a peaceful place to relax. Engage in calming activities like listening to soft music or practicing yoga.

Seek professional help when needed:

If sleep problems persist, consult your doctor or a sleep specialist for tailored advice.



Food that nourishes

Understanding what you should eat and drink when you have kidney disease can feel like a challenge, but the good news is that it doesn't need to be! A diet that protects our kidneys follows many of the same principles as a healthy diet for everyone. It is important to recognise however, that as kidney disease progresses your food and fluid needs will almost certainly change.

An Accredited Practicing Dietitian (APD) with experience of kidney disease, is the best person to speak to about these changes and to find out what food and drinks are right choices for you.

Whilst there is no single definition of a 'kidney friendly diet', a way of eating that protects our kidneys is largely consistent with a healthy eating pattern that everyone should follow.

The foods you eat can greatly impact the health of your kidneys. A kidney friendly diet is an eating plan that reduces the workload of the kidney and helps manage any side effects from kidneys that do not work well. This can help you stay healthy and slow down damage to the kidneys as well as having the additional benefit of improving your overall health.

It is important to know that the diet for chronic kidney disease changes as your disease progresses. This is why it is important to get more specific dietary advice if your condition changes. A dietitian can help you choose foods that will keep you healthy without overloading your kidneys.

For more information on please see our [Eating for Kidney Health](#) factsheet.



Weight

Staying active and eating healthy helps your kidneys work better, lowers your risk of diabetes and other health conditions shown to reduce kidney function. A good balance between exercise and food intake is important for good health and maintaining a healthy weight.

There are different opinions on what a healthy weight might be for someone with kidney disease. Opinions vary about using Body Mass Index (also called BMI), plain kilogram measurement, and others think it is more important to reduce the size of your waist measurement or hip to waist ratio.

Avoid extreme diets that restrict food groups or provide very little food, as they are unhealthy for maintaining a healthy weight.

Healthy eating tips:

- Include plenty of fruits, vegetables, legumes, and wholegrains.
- Choose lean proteins like chicken, fish, lentils, or beans.

- Reduce snacks high in saturated fat, sugar, or salt; choose fresh fruit, low-fat yoghurt (check for added sugar), and unsalted nuts instead.
- Limit fast food to occasional treats.

Consult your doctor or dietitian for personalised nutrition advice.



Watch what you drink

The amount you need to drink is individual and depends on things like your body size, your age, the climate, how active you are, and if you are unwell. Make water your drink of choice.

The stage of your kidney disease is also important. If you have severe kidney disease or are doing dialysis you will need to drink less than someone with early-stage kidney disease.

As a general rule, it is recommended that you should drink water to satisfy thirst.

What do I drink?

- Make water your drink of choice.
- Watch out for low or 'no sugar' soft drinks, these may increase potassium or phosphate levels.

- Avoid sugary drinks like soft drink and cordial.
- Drink less fruit and vegetable juices, which can be high in sugar.

Drinking the right amount of fluid is important for kidney health. Water is the best choice but the amount you need to drink varies according to the stage of your kidney disease. Check with your doctor for more specific advice and to get individualised advice about how much fluid you should drink across the day.

Drink water instead of sugary drinks to protect your kidneys.



Follow healthcare advice



Medications

The medicines your doctor prescribes depend on your overall health, the stage of your chronic kidney disease (CKD), and which treatment options will help you best. The medicines you take are likely to change over time, as your overall condition and health changes.

It is important to talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking any new medicines, including those you buy 'over the counter' at the supermarket or pharmacy, to check that they are okay for your kidneys.

There are several medicines that you may take to help your kidneys. Some of these medicines may also help with other health conditions, e.g., blood pressure tablets help with lowering your blood pressure but can also help your kidneys to work better for longer.

Talking to your doctor or pharmacist to understand which medicines you take, what they are for and how they work, can be helpful.

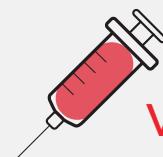
For more detailed information please see our Medicines and Kidney Disease factsheet.



Sick Day Action Plan

People with kidney disease should have a Sick Day Action Plan provided by your healthcare team.

A Sick Day Action Plan outlines steps you need to take to avoid damaging your kidneys when you are unwell. Ask for a Sick Day Action Plan at your next appointment. Kidney Health Australia has a template that can be used.

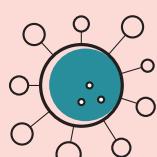


Vaccinations

Recommended vaccinations for people with CKD aged 18 years and over:

- Influenza
- Pneumococcal
- COVID-19
- Shingles
- Other vaccinations as recommended by your healthcare professionals.

Some dialysis and transplant medications may reduce their effectiveness. It is important to talk to your kidney specialist or doctor about getting your vaccines.



Infections

Kidney failure can increase your chances of getting infections. If you also have diabetes, your risk is even higher.

It is important to see your doctor if you have any symptoms such as fever, pain, aches and feeling generally unwell – don't ignore them and see your healthcare professional as soon as possible.



Limit alcohol intake

Drinking more alcohol than recommended can lead to heart disease and high blood pressure, increasing the risk of kidney disease.

To reduce the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury, healthy men and women should drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week and no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day. The less you drink, the lower your risk of harm from alcohol.

Tips to cut down on your alcohol intake:

- Ask for ice with your drinks - when the ice melts it will water down the alcohol.
- Have a glass of water after each alcoholic drink.
- Eat food before and while drinking alcohol.
- Check the label on your drink to see how many standard drinks it contains.

- Avoid using alcohol to deal with stress, anxiety or poor sleep. Although it may give short-term relief, drinking alcohol to deal with these problems may make them worse.
- Develop a range of alternative approaches to deal with stress and anxiety. Consult with your GP or other health professional for some possible solutions.



Smoking / Vaping

This is an important habit to change to reduce your risk of kidney disease. People who smoke or vape are three times more likely to have reduced kidney function and have a four to five times greater risk of a heart attack and stroke. Compared to people who have never smoked, the risk of developing CKD is increased by **34%** for smokers and **15%** for former smokers.

The sooner you quit the sooner your body can start to repair itself.

Tips to help you quit:

Call the **Quitline (13 78 48)** where highly skilled, friendly Quitline counsellors deliver behavioural interventions to help people stop smoking and/or vaping.

This includes helping people to:

- Identify and manage triggers to smoke or vape.
- Manage nicotine withdrawal symptoms and cravings.
- Build motivation, skills and confidence to quit.

Talking to your doctor has been shown to improve quitting rates.



Things to remember:

- ✓ Manage related conditions like **high blood pressure** and **diabetes** to protect your kidneys.
- ✓ **Stay active**, eat healthy foods, maintain a healthy weight, and avoid smoking or excessive alcohol.
- ✓ Prioritise **mental wellbeing** through relaxing activities, support networks, or professional help.
- ✓ **Stay vaccinated** and monitor for signs of infection to maintain overall health.

What does that word mean?

Accredited Practising Dietitian (ADP)

A person who is professionally qualified to give practical diet and nutrition advice.

Blood pressure – The pressure of the blood in the arteries as it is pumped around the body by the heart.

Body Mass Index (BMI) –

An approximate measure of your total body fat. It is worked out by dividing your weight in kilograms by your height in metres squared (m^2).

Diabetes – A chronic disease caused by problems with the production and/or action of insulin in the body which helps control blood sugar levels.

Dialysis – A treatment for kidney failure that removes waste products and excess fluid from your blood by filtering your blood through a special membrane.

Fatigue – A constant feeling of extreme tiredness or lack of energy that does not improve with rest. Fatigue can be physical, mental or a combination of both.

Healthcare team

– The team of people involved in your care. This may include health professionals, family members, loved ones, and yourself.

Kidneys – Most people have two kidneys, each about the size of an adult fist and weighing 150 grams. Inside each kidney there are about one million tiny units called nephrons. The nephrons are the part of the kidney that filters the blood. Each nephron is made up of a very small filter called a glomerulus. As blood passes through the nephron, water and waste products are removed. Most of the water returns to the blood and the waste products collect in the bladder then leave the body as urine (wee).

Most kidney diseases attack the nephrons.

Kidney failure – The stage of kidney disease when your kidneys have stopped working, so treatment such as dialysis or a transplant is needed to sustain life. Previously referred to as end stage kidney disease (ESKD); end stage kidney/renal failure (ESKF or ESRF), or stage 5 CKD.

Phosphate – A mineral that, together with calcium, keeps your bones strong and healthy. When your kidneys are not working properly, high levels of phosphate build up in your blood. Too much phosphate causes itching and pain in your joints, such as knees, elbows, and ankles.

Potassium – A mineral in your body that is controlled by your kidneys. It helps nerves, muscles and other cells work well. At very high levels, it may cause your heart to stop.

Sodium – An essential nutrient that regulates blood volume, blood pressure and water in the body. Also called salt.

Stroke – When blood supply to the brain is interrupted. When brain cells do not get enough blood supply, they die. A stroke is a life-threatening emergency.

Urine – The name for excess fluid and waste products that are removed from the body by the kidneys. Commonly called wee.

Special Thanks! This educational resource is supported by a sponsorship provided by Boehringer Ingelheim and Eli Lilly Alliance

Kidney Health[®]
Australia

Free Kidney Helpline 1800 454 363
kidney.org.au

If you have a hearing or speech impairment, contact the National Relay Service on 1800 555 677 or relayservice.com.au. Have them connect you to the Free Kidney Helpline - 1800 454 363



**WANT TO
LEARN MORE?**

Kidney Health 4 Life is a health and wellbeing program equipping people, and those that care for them, with the knowledge and resources to take more active management of their kidney health or kidney disease.



Join Kidney Health 4 Life
by scanning the QR code

This is intended as a general introduction to this topic and is not meant to substitute for your doctor's or health professional's advice. All care is taken to ensure that the information is relevant to the reader and applicable to each state in Australia. It should be noted that Kidney Health Australia recognises that each person's experience is individual and that variations do occur in treatment and management due to personal circumstances, the health professional and the state one lives in. Should you require further information always consult your doctor or health professional.

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