



Take Care of Your Kidneys

By Donna Fultz and Karen Wooldridge

You usually don't hear a lot about taking care of your kidneys. But March is National Kidney Month. So now is a good time to find out more about the fist-sized, bean shaped organs on both sides of your lower back. Why are they so important? And what you can do to protect them?

What your kidneys do?

Your kidneys keep you healthy by filtering your body's waste products, drugs, extra water, and other toxins out of your blood. These materials are then flushed out of your body as urine. About 200 quarts of blood – enough to fill a large bathtub – are filtered by your kidneys ever day. And about two quarts of waste is removed.

Many organs in the body depend on the kidneys. They help you stay healthy. The kidneys also keep your body in balance. Your kidneys do a lot to keep you going, like:

- Producing an active form of Vitamin D
- Keeping the amount of salt, potassium, and acid in your body at the right levels
- Balancing the body's fluids
- Sending out certain chemicals needed to keep your body's functions working well
- Helping to control blood pressure

What is kidney disease?

Over time, damage to your kidneys causes the tiny filters inside them to stop working as well as they should. When this happens, fluid builds up in your blood. This fluid hurts other parts of your body. If kidney disease is not treated at all or not treated early, the kidneys can begin to fail and slowly stop working.

Unfortunately, you may have no warning signs or symptoms until just before your kidneys stop working. More than 20 million Americans – that's one in nine adults – have long-term kidney disease. Sadly, most people don't know it. Once kidney disease develops, it doesn't go away. The sooner you find out about the disease, the sooner your doctor can start you on a treatment plan. Getting early care can help delay or prevent kidney failure. Kidney failure often leads to the need for dialysis or a kidney transplant. Dialysis is a process in which you're hooked up to a machine several times a week to clean your blood.

What causes kidney damage?

Many problems can lead to kidney damage. Here are the most common causes:

- **Glomerulonephritis** is a disease caused by inflammation of the kidney's filtering units. This disease can happen suddenly, often after a sickness like strep throat. Or the disease may develop over several years.
- **Polycystic kidney** is caused by fluid filled cysts in the kidneys that get bigger over time. These cysts, cause kidney damage and then kidney failure. This is a common kidney disease that can run in families.
- **Kidney stones** are very common. They cause very intense pain in the back and side before they are passed out of the body.
- **Urinary tract infections** happen when germs get into the system of organs (urinary tract) that your kidneys use to empty waster from your body. These infections cause pain and burning when you go to the bathroom. You also feel the need to urinate more often – sometimes very quickly! The infection usually affects your bladder but the infection can spread to the kidneys, causing a fever and back pain.
- **Drugs**, such as large amounts of over-the-counter pain medicines taken over a long period of time, street drugs, poisons, and bug sprays can hurt the kidneys.

For more information about causes, visit the National Kidney Foundation at www.kidney.org

Are you at higher risk for getting kidney disease?

Anyone can develop problems with their kidneys at any age. However, some people have a higher risk of getting kidney problems than other people do. You are at higher risk if you have one of these problems:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Family history of kidney disease or kidney failure – mother, father, brother or sister
- Heart disease
- 65 years of age or older
- African American, Hispanic American, Asian, Pacific Islander or American Indian

What can you do - get tested!

Here are some simple tests to find out if you have the disease:

- Blood pressure check
- Blood test to check how well your kidneys are working, this is known as a glomerular filtration rate (GFR)
- Urine test to check for certain proteins that can get into the urine if the kidneys are damaged.

If tests show you have kidney disease, get help. Your doctor can work with you to start a plan to help protect your kidneys from more damage. This plan may mean taking medicines and, watching and controlling your blood pressure and blood sugar. Your doctor may also suggest eating less salt and protein. If you have ongoing problems like diabetes or high blood pressure, ask your doctor how to handle these conditions to protect your kidneys.

If you have diabetes...

People with diabetes should talk to their doctor about these steps to help manage their condition:

- Having a yearly test for protein in the urine.
- Talking to a doctor such as your primary care physician or to one who is a kidney specialist, a nephrologist.
- Taking medicine that lowers your blood pressure and also slows down the kidney disease. There are two types of these drugs, angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors and angiotensin receptor blockers (ARBs), which have been proven effective in slowing the progression of kidney disease.

What are some warning signs of kidney disease?

- High blood pressure
- Protein or blood in the urine
- GFR (kidney test results) less than 60
- Going to the bathroom more often, especially at night or difficult or painful urination
- Puffiness around the eyes or swelling of the hands and feet

Questions you can ask your doctor?

- Based on my medical and family history, am I at risk for kidney disease?
- Do my blood and urine tests show signs of kidney disease?
- How often should I be tested?
- How can I keep my kidneys healthy

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About the Authors:

Karen Wooldridge

Karen Wooldridge is a MEDIC Certified Health Content Specialist. She has been a health content specialist for Humana for over 10 years.



30 years and enjoys using her clinical background to develop initiatives to improve the health of Humana members. In her time off she enjoys trying new recipes, gardening, browsing through antique malls, and is looking forward to visiting her extended family in Japan this year.



Donna Fultz

Donna Fultz, a Corporate Quality Management nurse, has worked for Humana almost 25 years. In her present position she supports the market quality nurses. Away from work, Donna loves the outdoors and being with her family, friends and going to yard sales with her dog, Shelby.

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