



## **Patient information: Chronic kidney disease (The Basics)**

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

**What is chronic kidney disease?** — Chronic kidney disease is when the kidneys stop working as well as they should. When they are working normally, the kidneys filter the blood and remove waste and excess salt and water ([figure 1](#)).

In people with chronic kidney disease, the kidneys slowly lose the ability to filter the blood. In time, the kidneys can stop working completely. That is why it is so important to keep chronic kidney disease from getting worse.

**What are the symptoms of chronic kidney disease?** — At first, chronic kidney disease causes no symptoms. As the disease gets worse, it can:

- Make your feet, ankles, or legs swell (doctors call this "edema")
- Give you high blood pressure
- Make you very tired
- Damage your bones

**Is there anything I can do to keep my kidneys from getting worse if I have chronic kidney disease?** — Yes, you can protect your kidneys by:

- Taking blood pressure and other medicines every day, if your doctor or nurse prescribes them to you
- Keeping your blood sugar in a healthy range, if you have diabetes
- Changing your diet, if your doctor or nurse says you should (some people with kidney disease should limit the amount of meat they eat)
- Avoiding medicines known as "nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs," or NSAIDs. These medicines include [ibuprofen](#) (sold as Advil® or Motrin®) and [naproxen](#) (sold as Aleve®). Check with your doctor, nurse, or kidney specialist before starting any new medicines — even over-the-counter ones.

**What are the treatments for chronic kidney disease?** — People in the early stages of chronic kidney disease can take medicines to keep the disease from getting worse. For example, many people with chronic kidney disease should take medicines known as "ACE inhibitors" or "angiotensin receptor blockers." If your doctor or nurse prescribes these medicines, it is very important that you take them every day as directed. If they cause side effects or cost too much, speak to your doctor or nurse about it. He or she might have solutions to offer.

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**What happens if my kidneys stop working completely?** — If your kidneys stop working completely, you can choose between three different treatments to take over the job of your kidneys. Your choices are described below.

- You can have kidney transplant surgery. That way, the new kidney can do the job of your own kidneys. If you have a kidney transplant, you will need to take medicines for the rest of your life to keep your body from reacting badly to the new kidney. (You only need one kidney to live.)
- You can have your blood filtered by a machine. This treatment is called "hemodialysis," but many people call it just "dialysis." If you choose this approach, you will need to be hooked up to the machine at least 3 times a week for a few hours for the rest of your life. Before you start, you will also need to have surgery to prepare a blood vessel for attachment to the machine.
- You can learn to use a special fluid that has to be piped in and out of your belly every day. This treatment is called "peritoneal dialysis." If you choose this type of dialysis, you will need surgery to have a tube implanted in your belly. Then you will have to learn how to pipe the fluid in and out through that tube.

**How do I choose between the different treatment options?** — You and your doctor will need to work together to find a treatment that's right for you. Kidney transplant surgery is usually the best option for most people. But often there are no kidneys available for transplant.

Ask your doctor to explain all of your options and how they might work for you. Then talk openly with him or her about how you feel about all of the options. You may even decide that you do not want any treatment. That is your choice.

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