

How to Protect Your Kidneys

Manage Health Problems

There are steps you can take to protect your kidneys. These can range from keeping other health problems in control to changing some parts of your lifestyle. If you are overweight, losing weight can help protect your kidneys. The changes are worth it. Having even a little bit of kidney function is much better than not having any.

Two health problems cause most of the kidney failure in the U.S.: diabetes and high blood pressure.



- To learn more about diabetes, visit [How to Slow Kidney Disease: When You Have Diabetes](#).
- To learn more about high blood pressure, visit [How to Slow Kidney Disease: When You Have High Blood Pressure](#).

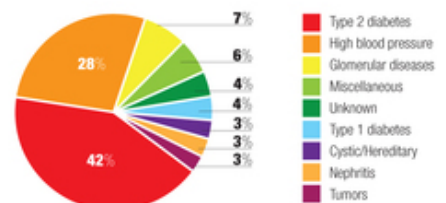
To Slow Chronic Kidney Disease, Treat the Cause

As you can see in the pie chart on the right (click on the image to enlarge it), there are many health problems that can damage the kidneys.

Most kidney failure in the U.S. is caused by either type 2 diabetes or high blood pressure—or both at the same time.

To learn more:

- If you have diabetes, visit [How to Slow Kidney Disease: When You Have Diabetes](#).
- If you have high blood pressure, visit [How to Slow Kidney Disease: When You Have High Blood Pressure](#).



Causes of Chronic Kidney Disease

Click on image to enlarge

Test For and Treat High Blood Sugar and Blood Pressure

If you have **diabetes**, good blood sugar control can help protect your kidneys. Knowing what your blood sugar is and how it reacts to what you do and what you eat is the first step to keeping it in control. Your care team will tell you what blood sugar targets to aim for.

Keeping your **blood pressure** in the target range can also protect your kidneys. Like blood sugar, knowing your blood pressure is the first step to getting it in control.



Study YOUR Cause of Kidney Disease

Learn about the illness that caused your kidney problem.
Look it up. HOW?

- Ask your care team how to spell the name of your problem so you can learn more about it.
- Go to a library and talk to a librarian.
- The VA Medical Center library is even better. Use the online [Veteran's Health Library \(VHL\)](#) to find resources.
- Use other sites on the Internet. Put the name of your problem into a search engine and go to a government or non-profit site, like [Medline Plus from the National Institutes of Health*](#) or the [National Kidney Disease Education Program*](#).
- Go to your VA patient education nurse and ask for help.



Talk to your care team about what you learn. You just might find your way to something that can help you.

* Links will take you outside of the Department of Veterans Affairs website. VA does not endorse and is not responsible for the content of the linked websites.

Make Good Food and Drink Choices

People often want to know what they can eat or drink to keep their kidneys healthy. Good choices are foods that are healthful in general—like fruits and vegetables. Also, try to eat foods that are fresh and have few ingredients. Eat a rainbow!



To protect your kidneys you can also:

- Avoid salty, deep fried, and highly processed foods like “helpers,” canned soups, fast food, and soda.
- Drink water—not soda, juice, or diet drinks with artificial sweeteners.

To learn more about it, visit the Nutrition Room.

NOTE: If your kidneys have failed, you may have limits on what you can eat and drink based on the type of treatment you choose. Talk to your dietitian to learn what’s best for you.

A Protein Serving is About the Size of a Deck of Cards

Some doctors may ask you to eat less protein to ease the burden on weak kidneys. Eating less protein may help slow kidney disease. But, you do have to eat **SOME** protein. Protein is a key building block for your body. If you limit it too much, your body may break down muscle.

A piece of meat the size of a deck of cards is about 4 oz of protein. This is one serving. You may need to adjust the amount of protein you eat during a meal. Small pieces in a kebab, salad, or stir-fry are a good way to get enough, but not too much.



Stay Active in Life

Being active can help protect your kidneys. Exercise helps your whole body work the way it should, and keeps you feeling good about your life and what you can do. If you have not been active, talk with your care team about an exercise plan. A referral to a physical therapist may help you get started.

Visit **MOVE!**[®], a VA program to help you get started with exercise and weight management.



Avoid NSAID Pain Pills

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory pain pills, or NSAIDs, are a rare cause of kidney failure—most often if they are taken daily for a year or more. Or, they can make the disease progress faster. Most NSAIDs are over-the-counter, like:

- Ibuprofen
- Naproxen

Avoid NSAIDs as much as you can.

Other NSAIDs are prescribed by a doctor, like:

- Indomethacin
- Piroxicam
- Nabumetone
- Celecoxib

Talk to your care team about pain treatment that's safe for you to use and won't hurt your kidneys, like:

- Cold or heat
- Physical therapy
- TENS (electrical stimulation)
- Biofeedback
- Acupuncture
- A referral to the VA Pain Clinic



Avoid Substance Abuse

Kidney disease is not something to take lightly. Many street drugs and IV drugs can damage your kidneys. These include:

- Aerosols
- Cocaine and crack cocaine
- Ecstasy
- Heroin
- LSD
- Meth
- PCP
- Poppers



To find out if a street drug can harm your kidneys, put the drug name and the word "kidneys" into an Internet search engine.

If you use drugs and need help to stop, talk to your care team. The VA has substance abuse treatments that can help you. Your care team can refer you. [Click here](#) to learn more.

Smoking Makes Kidney Disease Get Worse FASTER

Most of us know that smoking is bad for us. It causes lung cancer and heart disease. Most people don't know that smoking *speeds up kidney disease*, too.

The tiny filters inside your kidneys are blood vessels, and smoking *gums up* blood vessels. If you smoke and have kidney problems, quitting is one of the best gifts you can give yourself.

The VA offers smoking cessation classes and treatment, like patches and gum. Talk to your care team if you need help to stop smoking.



Protect Your Kidneys if You Need an X-ray Test with Dye

IV contrast dye given for some X-ray tests can harm your kidneys. If you have a kidney problem, tell the radiologist.

The doctor may be able to:

- Not use contrast dye
- Do an ultrasound instead of an X-ray
- Dilute the dye so it is thinner and less likely to harm your kidneys
- Flush the dye out with lots of IV fluids

If you *must* have dye, your doctor may prescribe a drug called **acetylcysteine** to help protect your kidneys from harm. You would need to take it the day before an X-ray dye test.

Talk to your care team about how much to drink before an X-ray dye test and whether to skip a water pill if you take one. If you take some types of blood pressure pills, like ACE-inhibitors or ARBs, your doctor may ask you to stop taking them a few days before the test. (You would start taking them again after the test is done.)

Avoid **gadolinium** contrast dye (used for some MRI tests). It can cause a rare but severe problem called *nephrogenic systemic fibrosis* (NSF) when the kidneys don't work well. Ask the doctor to be sure you are not given this dye.



Ask a Pharmacist BEFORE You Take Any New Medicines

Wastes that build up when your body breaks down medicines can be cleaned out of your blood by your kidneys. When your kidneys don't work well, you may need a lower dose of some medicines. Be sure to tell your health care team about ALL medicines you take. This includes:

- Over-the-counter products
- Drugs a doctor prescribes for you
- Herbal or folk remedies

Ask before you take a new medicine—just in case. To learn more about medicines, visit the Pharmacy.

