

If Your Kidneys Fail

Taking an Active Role

It can be a huge shock to learn that your kidneys are failing—even if you knew it was coming. Kidney failure may sound like the end of the world. It's not. You CAN have a good life and keep doing many of the things you enjoy. The keys are:

- Keep a positive attitude
- Learn all you can
- Take an active role in your treatment

You're getting a good start right now by visiting this site.

Do you know someone who did not do well on dialysis? Please keep in mind that a poor outcome on dialysis may be due to the disease that caused the kidneys to fail—not the dialysis treatments. And, today, there are more options for dialysis than ever before, so you can choose a treatment plan that is a good fit for your life.



An Emotional Time

It's normal to have strong emotions when your doctor tells you that your kidneys are failing. You may be afraid, worried, depressed, or angry. You might even have all of these feelings at the same time. If your feelings are getting the best of you, you are not alone. You wouldn't be human if you weren't scared and upset! Talk to someone about how you feel—a loved one, your care team, a clergy person, or a counselor.

When you believe that you can have a good life, it will help you to get a grip on your feelings so you can move forward and make decisions—like what treatment to choose. For tips on coping with kidney disease, visit the Social Services Room.



You CAN Have a Future

The most important thing for you to know is, you CAN have a future with kidney failure. Your kidneys aren't working right. But, you are still you. You can choose to keep following your dreams—or find new ones. This is a photo of a person with kidney failure who has had a good life for decades after her kidneys failed. Does everyone manage this? No. But it is possible, and that means you can try.



Keep Your Heart Healthy

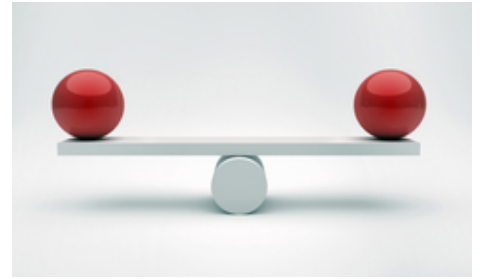
Health problems that cause kidney failure can also harm your heart. So, if you want to keep doing the things you love, it's important to take care of your heart. How can you keep your heart healthy? Here are a few ideas:



- Exercise! Talk to your care team if you are out of shape. Just walking can help your heart. Start slow and build up as you get stronger.
- Quit smoking. If you smoke, stopping is one of the best things you can do for your heart. Talk to your care team if you need help.
- Keep your blood pressure in the target range your care team sets. This may mean that you need to take blood pressure pills.
- Keep your cholesterol in the target range your care team sets. This may mean that you need to take pills to lower your cholesterol.
- Eat a healthy diet, with vegetables and fruits. Lose weight if you are overweight. Talk to the dietitian to learn more.
- Drink only moderate amounts of alcohol. How much is moderate? Ask your care team.

Balancing Water and Minerals

The main job of healthy kidneys is to keep water and key minerals in your body in balance. To keep the balance, kidneys measure levels of water and electrolytes in your blood. They send wastes and extra water to the “trash can”—your bladder. Your body removes them as urine. If blood levels of a substance are low, healthy kidneys keep it in the blood and send messages to the rest of your body to get more. These messages are called hormones.



Replacing Kidney Function

If your kidneys fail, you will need treatment to take over the work of the kidneys. Your treatment needs to remove waste, excess water and sodium from your blood and help control blood pressure. And, you may need to take medications to replace the hormones your body needs.



Choosing a Treatment

There are three main treatment options for kidney failure. The first two options—a kidney transplant or dialysis—may help you live. Some people choose the third option—medical care without dialysis—which allows a natural death.

There are two main types of dialysis: peritoneal dialysis and hemodialysis. Peritoneal dialysis is most often done at home. Hemodialysis can be done at home or in a clinic.

Visit all the topics in this room to learn more about treatment options for kidney failure.



Treatment Options and Your Life

Life is a journey. You can go to one place or many places on a journey, and get where you are going in a number of ways. You'll need to think about what you want your life journey with kidney failure to be. The choice you make about how to treat your kidney failure will have an impact on your lifestyle. This includes:



- What you can eat and drink
- How many medications you may need to take each day
- How much energy you may have
- Whether you feel well enough to work
- How easy it is to travel
- How well you sleep
- Your sex life and ability to carry or father children
- How long you may live

Choosing a treatment that is a good fit for you can help you to have a good life. If you have other health problems, they may play a role in the treatment choice you make.

You Can Change Your Treatment Choice Any Time

The VA offers every treatment option for kidney failure. When you choose a treatment, it doesn't have to be a permanent choice. If you try a treatment and it doesn't work out the way you hoped, you can change. Please give your treatment a good try first, though. For medical reasons, some treatments may be a better fit for you than others. Your doctor can advise you about any medical reasons why you can't do a certain treatment, and can help guide your choices.

