Health Basics

Kidney Disease

What is chronic kidney disease (CKD)?
According to the National Kidney Foundation, chronic kidney disease (CKD) includes conditions that damage your kidneys and decrease their ability to keep you healthy by detoxifying and eliminating wastes in your blood, maintaining normal blood pressure, supporting healthy bones and tissues, regulating your body's salt potassium and acid content, and producing hormones that affect the way other organs function.

In the United States, 30 million Americans adults have CKD and millions of others are at increased risk.

What are the symptoms of CKD?

Signs and symptoms of chronic kidney disease develop over time if kidney damage progresses slowly. These may include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Loss of appetite
- Fatigue and weakness
- Sleep problems
- Changes in how much you urinate
- Decreased mental sharpness
- Muscle twitches and cramps
- Swelling of feet and ankles
- Persistent itching
- Chest pain, if fluid builds up around the lining of the heart
- Shortness of breath, if fluid builds up in the lungs
- High blood pressure (hypertension) that's difficult to control

What are the risk factors for CKD?

You may have an increased risk for kidney disease if you:

- have diabetes
- have high blood pressure
- have a family history of kidney failure
- are older
- belong to a population group that has a high rate of diabetes or high blood pressure, such as African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian, Pacific Islanders and American Indians.

What is the testing procedure for CKD?
Doctors primarily use blood and urine tests to check kidney function. These tests measure the levels of various substances in the body, such as urea, creatinine, certain electrolytes (sodium and potassium, for example), glucose (sugar) hormones in the blood and protein in the urine.

Doctors may also use other tests to monitor reduced kidney function or determine if another kidney disease condition is contributing to decreased kidney function. Some of these tests are an ultrasound of the kidneys, to assess the size, shape and location of the kidneys and, at times, blood flow to the kidneys; an angiogram of the kidney (to check for problems caused by restricted blood flow), and a kidney biopsy, to obtain a sample of your kidney tissue so that it can be examined under a microscope.

A urine test is indicated in particular for people with diabetes. And for people with high blood pressure, doctors recommend that on the first diagnosis of the condition, they ask for an estimate of their glomular filtration rate (GFR), the flow rate of filtered fluid through the kidney and a measurement used to check its function. After that, doctors suggest they have their overall health and kidney function evaluated yearly

How is CKD treated?

- Dialysis: This procedure cleans the blood and acts as an artificial kidney to get rid of body waste, excess salt and water and regulate blood pressure.
- Kidney transplant: In this procedure the failed kidney is replaced with a working kidney from another person, called a donor. Kidney transplants are of two types; those that come from living donors and those that come from unrelated donors who have died (non-living donors). Approximately more than 70,000 Americans are waiting for a kidney transplant.

For more information on the kidneys and kidney disease, visit the National Kidney Foundation at kidney.org.

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