Kidneys - age-related problems

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Older people are more at risk of some kidney and urinary tract diseases. Kidney diseases can be serious, but early detection and proper treatment can increase the life of your kidneys. Have a regular check-up with your doctor and ask for your kidney function to be checked.

Your kidneys can be affected or damaged by a variety of diseases and conditions. As you get older, you are more likely to suffer from kidney and urinary tract problems. Kidney problems can also increase the risk of other conditions such as cardiovascular (heart and blood vessel) disease.

Kidney diseases can be serious, but early detection and good management can increase the life of your kidneys.

Kidney disease is not always accompanied by warning signs. If you have one of the risk factors for kidney disease, it is recommended that you have a kidney health check (blood test, urine test and blood pressure check) from your doctor at least every two years.

Types of age-related kidney disease

Older people are more at risk of some kidney and urinary tract diseases. These include:

- inflammation or swelling of the kidneys – this can be caused by conditions such as glomerulonephritis
- diabetes – this is the most common cause of kidney disease in Australia. Damage can occur to blood vessels and nerves, even when the diabetes is well managed
- urinary tract infections – if left untreated, a urinary tract infection may spread into the kidneys. It is important to see a doctor if a kidney infection is suspected, because lasting damage can occur if it is left untreated. Urinary tract infections are very common, particularly in women and with increasing age
- urinary incontinence – this is uncontrolled leaking of urine from the bladder, which can increase the risk of urinary tract infections. Your doctor should check any problems linked to passing urine, as they may indicate more serious kidney problems or other conditions, such as an enlarged prostate in men
- renovascular disease – fatty deposits, cholesterol, calcium and other substances are deposited in the inner lining of the arteries, causing narrowing or blockage of the renal artery. This affects the kidneys’ filters and reduces the blood supply to the kidneys, resulting in high blood pressure and reduced kidney function. This is the most common cause of kidney failure in the elderly
- high blood pressure – if left untreated, high blood pressure can increase the risk of heart attack, stroke and loss of vision, and cause kidney damage
- hereditary kidney diseases – including polycystic kidney disease.

Scarring of the kidneys mainly affects young children and is caused by a condition called ‘urinary reflux’. In this condition, there is a backflow of urine from the bladder into the kidneys.

Symptoms of kidney disease

Kidney disease is called a ‘silent disease’ as there are often no warning signs. People may lose up to 90 per cent of their kidney function before getting any symptoms. The first signs of kidney disease may be general and can include:

- high blood pressure
- changes in the amount and number of times urine is passed (for example, at night)
- changes in the appearance of urine
- blood in the urine
- puffiness of the legs and ankles
- pain in the kidney area
- tiredness
- loss of appetite
- difficulty sleeping
- headaches
- lack of concentration
- itching
- shortness of breath
- nausea and vomiting
- bad breath and a metallic taste in the mouth.

Risk factors for age-related kidney disease

Some conditions that affect the kidneys and urinary tract are more common as people get older. You are more at risk of developing kidney disease if you:

- are over 60 years of age
- have diabetes
- are obese
- have high blood pressure
have established heart problems (heart failure or past heart attack) or have had a stroke
are a smoker
have a family history of kidney failure
have a history of acute kidney injury
are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin.

Age-related kidney disease can affect your heart

People with chronic kidney disease are two to three times more likely to have a [heart attack](#), and cardiovascular disease remains the leading cause of death for people on dialysis and those who have a transplanted kidney.

People at every stage of chronic kidney disease are at more risk of cardiovascular disease, although those in the later stages have the highest risk.

Keeping your kidneys healthy

There are a number of things you can do to keep your kidneys healthy, including:

- If you have diabetes, make sure that your blood sugar control is excellent. Follow your doctor’s advice about insulin injections, medicines, diet, physical activity and monitoring your blood sugar.
- Control high blood pressure. Have your blood pressure checked regularly. Medications used to lower blood pressure (anti-hypertensive medications), such as ACE inhibitors or angiotensin blockers, can slow the development of kidney disease.
- If you have one of the risk factors for kidney disease, have a kidney health check (blood test, urine test and blood pressure check) at least every two years (every year if you have diabetes or high blood pressure).
- Treat urinary tract infections immediately.
- Control blood cholesterol levels with diet and medications if necessary.
- Drink plenty of water and choose foods that are low in sugar, fat and salt, but high in fibre. Stick to moderate serving sizes.
- Do not smoke.
- Drink alcohol in moderation only.
- Stay at a healthy weight for your height and age.
- Try to exercise moderately for at least 30 minutes a day.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Kidney Health Australia helpline Tel. 1800 454 363

References

- [Chronic kidney disease (CKD) management in general practice](#), 2015, Kidney Health Australia.

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More information

Kidney and bladder

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Kidney and bladder basics
- Kidney conditions
- Bladder and urinary tract problems
- Kidney treatments and transplants
- Incontinence

Kidney and bladder basics

- Bladder
  Your bladder is a hollow organ that stores urine from the kidneys...
- Kidney disease
  Exercise, a balanced diet and not smoking will help to keep your kidneys working well...
- Kidneys
  Well-functioning kidneys are essential to a healthy life...
- Urinary system
  Most waste products are removed from the body by the urinary system...

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Kidney conditions

- Diabetes and kidney failure
  Kidney failure means the kidneys can no longer remove waste and maintain the level of fluid and salts that the body needs.

- Granulomatosis with polyangiitis
  Granulomatosis with polyangiitis (GPA), formerly known as Wegener granulomatosis is a rare condition that targets the arteries, veins and capillaries of the kidneys and the respiratory system.

- Health check
  This health assessment questionnaire will identify which zones of your lifestyle are contributing to your personal health risk and provide actions you can take to make positive change.

- Kidney cancer
  Most kidney cancers are found when the doctor is checking for something else.

- Kidney failure
  You can lose up to 90 per cent of kidney function before you even feel sick.

- Kidneys - age-related problems
  Early detection of kidney disease and good management can increase the life of your kidneys.

- Kidneys - cystic kidney disease
  A cyst on your kidney does not automatically mean that you have cystic kidney disease.

- Kidneys - medullary cystic kidney disease
  Medullary cystic kidney disease causes the growth of abnormal cysts in the kidneys.

- Kidneys - medullary sponge kidney
  Medullary sponge kidney is a condition where cysts develop in the urine-collecting ducts and tubules of one or both kidneys.

- Kidneys - nephrotic syndrome
  Nephrotic syndrome is where the kidneys remove too much protein from the blood.

- Kidneys - polycystic kidney disease (PKD)
  Polycystic kidney disease is a common cause of kidney failure in Australia and equally affects men and women of different ethnic backgrounds.

- Kidney stones
  For most types of kidney stones, the best ways to prevent stone growth or recurrence are to drink enough fluids, avoid urinary infections and treat with medications.

- Kidneys - urinary reflux
  Kidney reflux means that one or both valves in the ureters are not working properly, which can cause urinary infections.

Bladder and urinary tract problems

- Bladder cancer
  Bladder cancer affects twice as many men as women.

- Bladder prolapse
  Bladder prolapse is when the bladder bulges into the vagina.

- Cystitis
  Cystitis is the most common urinary tract infection in women.

Prostate gland and urinary problems

- Many men experience urinary changes as they age, which may be caused by inflammation or enlargement of the prostate gland.

Urinary system birth defects

- Common birth defects of the urinary system include hypospadias, obstructive defects of the renal pelvis and renal agenesis.

Urinary tract infections (UTI)

- Urinary tract infections (UTIs) can target the urethra, bladder or kidneys.
Kidney treatments and transplants

- Kidney donation
  Kidneys are often donated after death but more people are choosing to donate one of their kidneys while still alive (living kidney donation).

- Kidney - dialysis and transplant
  People with kidney failure need dialysis or a transplant to stay alive.

- Living with kidney failure
  Although dialysis or transplant surgery after kidney failure can be challenging, many people go on to live active and productive lives.

Incontinence

- Bedwetting
  Bedwetting is a problem for many children and punishing them for it will only add to their distress.

- Dementia - continence issues
  Incontinence may occur in people with dementia for many reasons.

- Incontinence and continence problems
  Many things can be done to manage, treat and sometimes cure incontinence and continence problems.

- Incontinence - prevention tips
  Incontinence can be prevented in most cases.

- Incontinence - tips for carers
  A person's incontinence can be a challenging problem for their carer, but help is available from a range of sources, so don't think you must cope alone.

- Pelvic floor
  Pelvic floor exercises are designed to improve muscle tone and prevent the need for corrective surgery.

Related Information

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Home

Related information on other websites

- Kidney Health Australia.
- National Kidney Disease Education Program.

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