

**Fact sheet**

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# Common Kidney Disease Symptoms and Management Options

Kidney disease symptoms can affect many areas of your health and well-being. These symptoms may be caused either by the kidney disease itself, or by its treatment (for example side-effects of dialysis or medications). These symptoms may be experienced by people on dialysis as well as those choosing supportive care. Some symptoms may be more severe than others, and may affect different people in different ways.

Managing your symptoms well will improve your quality of life. Treatments are available for most symptoms, so don't hesitate to talk to your health care team if you have a symptom that is bothering you. You may be asked to regularly complete a symptom assessment and quality of life survey so that your health care team can monitor the frequency and severity of your symptoms.

The following are some of the more common symptoms that may be felt by people with end stage kidney disease. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, speak with your healthcare team who can investigate further and suggest treatment or ways to help you manage your symptoms.



## Anaemia

Anaemia can occur when there are not enough red blood cells in your blood. Red blood cells help carry oxygen around the body to be used as energy. If you have anaemia you can feel tired, cold, dizzy, sad, and confused or feel a shortness of breath. Different treatments are available and can include medication as well as diet modification. See the *All About Anaemia* fact sheet for more information.

## Lack of energy

People whose kidneys are not working can feel tired for a number of reasons and these may vary from person to person. Some reasons, such as low red blood cell count or anaemia, can be treated with medication. Others reasons such as poor sleep, depression, uraemia and heart disease require different investigations and treatment. There may be simple changes you can make to improve your energy levels. Some people find that their energy levels improve once they start treatment for kidney disease.

## Change of taste, bad breath, or dry mouth

As your kidney function declines, wastes will build up in your blood. This is called uraemia. Uraemia can lead to a metal-like taste in your mouth and bad breath. It may also lead to a loss of appetite as foods can change in taste. Dry mouth is another common symptom of reduced kidney function. This can be relieved by the use of saline spray, ice, or chewing gum if appropriate.

## Feeling sick in your stomach (nausea and vomiting)

Nausea and vomiting can occur as kidney function decreases. This can be due to the build-up of wastes in your body or a side effect from dialysis or medication. This may lead to a loss of appetite, and weight loss. A renal dietitian or renal nurse will be able to provide advice on what to eat to obtain the nutrients your body needs. Eating smaller amounts more often, or avoiding certain foods may be helpful. Medications can also be prescribed to help reduce these symptoms.

## Itchy skin

Itchy skin (also called pruritus) is a common symptom for people with kidney disease. Chemical imbalances and changes to nerves and dry skin all contribute to this symptom. Medications and skin creams may help. You may also want to talk to your pharmacist about what other products are available and which products are best to avoid.

## Restless legs

Many people with end stage kidney disease experience aching, uncomfortable, jittery, or "restless" legs. A strong impulse to kick or thrash the legs is common. This may make it difficult for you to sleep at night. You may start sleeping more during the day and less at night. Some people find massages or warm baths can provide relief. You may like to try relaxation techniques or some exercise. Medications to minimise restless legs and improve sleep can also be prescribed.

## Sleeping problems

There are many reasons why you may have trouble getting to sleep, or have difficulty sleeping throughout the night. You may feel tired, even after adequate sleep. Some possible reasons may be pain, worrying thoughts or low mood, restless legs, difficulty breathing or snoring. If you are having problems with sleep please discuss this with your health care team as there are many tips and treatments that may be helpful. Medication is available however some can be harmful to your kidneys, so ensure you discuss with your health care team.

## Shortness of breath

Trouble catching your breath can be due to anaemia, or from extra fluid building up in your lungs. Medications can be prescribed to try to reduce fluid retention and to treat anaemia.

## Swelling

As your kidney function declines, your kidneys do not remove enough excess fluid from your body. This extra fluid can build up causing swelling in your legs, ankles, feet, face, and/or hands. Medications and restricting the amount of liquid and salt in your diet can help to control this. Talk to your renal nurse or dietitian about limiting salt and fluid from your diet.

## Constipation and diarrhoea

Reduced kidney function can lead to bowel problems such as constipation and diarrhoea. This can cause stomach discomfort including pain, bloating, gas and nausea. A renal dietitian or renal nurse may be able to suggest how to safely increase the fibre in your diet. Gentle exercise such as walking can also help relieve discomfort. Medications can also provide relief.

## Pain

Body pain is common for people with kidney disease. This pain may be in your muscles, bones or joints such as arthritis, nerve pain such as pain in the feet, calves and hands that may occur with diabetes, or headaches. Sometimes, people experience leg cramps during or after haemodialysis, particularly if their blood pressure drops.

Medications can successfully relieve your pain. However, it is important that you discuss pain management with your health care team as some medications are not appropriate for people with kidney disease. The use

of physiotherapy to include gentle exercises into your daily life can also help with pain management, especially for muscle and bone pain. You may be referred to a specialist pain clinic if your pain is difficult to manage.

## Mood and well-being

Mood disorders are commonly experienced by people at all stages of kidney disease. Depression, anxiety, anger and stress can be a reaction to your diagnosis, a result of physical changes or even a side-effect of your medications.

There are many different therapies and medications that can help if you are feeling any of these emotions. Talk to your health care team who understand these problems you may be facing and can refer you to a specialist. Your health care team can also investigate physical causes or possible medication side-effects.

## Changes in memory, attention and concentration

Kidney disease can result in changes to your memory, your concentration, and your ability to plan tasks in a step-by-step way. This can make it difficult for you to remember to do things that are necessary for you to manage your kidney disease, such as taking your medications as directed and following the advice of your health care team. If you, or your family or carers notice changes in your memory, attention or concentration, talk to your health care team about tips that may help.

## Bone disease

Bone disease can be caused by an imbalance of calcium and phosphate in your body. Your bones begin to weaken and become damaged as your kidneys can no longer maintain a healthy level. You may experience bone pain, weakened bones, itchy skin and joint pain as a result. Medications are available and your healthcare team or renal dietitian may recommend changes to your diet. See the *Calcium and Phosphate Balance with Kidney Disease* fact sheet for more information.

## Hair Loss

Low levels of protein or zinc, thyroid problems, medication side-effects or changes in dialysers can cause your hair to break easily and fall out. Talk to your healthcare team or renal dietitian about making sure you are getting enough nutrients in your diet every day. Treating your hair gently can also prevent further damage.



### THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Managing your symptoms well will improve your quality of life. Treatments are available for most symptoms, so don't hesitate to talk to your health care team if you have a symptom that's bothering you.
- Depending on the cause of your symptom, treatments may vary and can include medication as well as diet and lifestyle changes.
- Some medications are harmful to your kidneys, so it is important to discuss treatments with your healthcare team.

## What does that word mean?

**Dialysis** - A treatment for end stage kidney disease that removes waste products and excess fluid from your blood by filtering your blood through a special membrane. There are two types of dialysis; haemodialysis and peritoneal dialysis.

**Fluid retention** - When your body does not remove enough liquid (water). This can cause swollen or puffy ankles, face or hands.

**Malnutrition** - Lack of proper nutrition, which may be caused by not having enough to eat, not eating enough of the right things, or your body being unable to use the food that you do eat.

**Supportive Care** - Supportive care (also called non-dialysis supportive care or conservative care) is care given to prevent or manage symptoms and side effects of end stage kidney disease, which does not involve dialysis. With supportive care, medications, diet and other support measures are used to manage your symptoms of end stage kidney disease to allow you to live as well as possible for as long as possible.

**Thyroid** - The thyroid gland regulates many things including body and brain growth and development, body temperature, energy levels and your metabolism.

For more information about kidney or urinary health, please contact our free call Kidney Health Information Service (KHIS) on 1800 454 363.

Or visit our website [kidney.org.au](http://kidney.org.au) to access free health literature.

This is intended as a general introduction to this topic and is not meant to substitute for your's or Health Professional's advice. All care is taken to ensure that the information is relevant to the reader and applicable to each state in Australia. It should be noted that Kidney Health Australia recognises that each person's experience is individual and that variations do occur in treatment and management due to personal circumstances, the health professional and the state one lives in. Should you require further information always consult your or health professional.



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