



What Happens When Kidney Disease Gets Worse?

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Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is a lifelong illness that slowly gets worse over time. It affects many parts of your body. This guide talks about some common problems that can happen as CKD gets worse, how to know if you have them, and what you can do.

Many of these conditions require diet recommendations and changes. You may need individual help to tailor your diet to your needs, based on things like your bloodwork, tastes, or cultural preferences.



Ask your doctor for a referral to a special renal dietitian. A renal dietitian will help you develop a personal meal plan.

Anemia

Anemia means your body doesn't make enough healthy red blood cells or hemoglobin. Red blood cells carry oxygen to your body. Hemoglobin is a protein in red blood cells that helps them carry oxygen.



How You Might Feel

- Feeling cold
- Tired or weak
- Short of breath
- Fast heartbeat
- Headache or chest pain



How Your Doctor Finds Out

A blood test checks your red blood cells, hemoglobin, and iron levels. On your annual lab work, you may see one of these names:

- CBC – a complete blood count showing red blood cell count and hemoglobin.
- Iron studies (Ferritin, Iron and TIBC) may be added if anemia is suspected.



What You Can Do

- Take iron pills or get iron treatment through an IV (tube in your arm), if your doctor says so.
- You might get a shot (erythropoiesis or EPO injection) to help your body make more red blood cells.

Metabolic Acidosis

Your kidneys usually remove acid from your blood. When they don't work well, acid builds up.

How You Might Feel

- Fast breathing, or deep, hard breathing
- Nausea or vomiting
- Confused or very tired
- Loss of appetite

How Your Doctor Finds Out

A blood test measures a chemical called bicarbonate (or CO₂). If the CO₂ in your blood is low, it tells your doctor that the acid in your blood is high.

What You Can Do

Your doctor may give you sodium bicarbonate (like a baking soda pill) to help balance the acid. **Do not take this medicine unless your doctor has told you that you need it.**

Hyperkalemia (High Potassium)

Your kidneys help remove extra potassium. When your kidneys don't work well, potassium can build up in your blood. High potassium in your blood can affect your muscles, heart, and nerves.

How You Might Feel

- Weak or tired
- Irregular heartbeat or chest fluttering
- Muscle cramps or tingling
- Sometimes no symptoms at all

How Your Doctor Finds Out

- Blood tests to check your potassium level
- May also check your kidney function, medications, and diet

What You Can Do

- Avoid or limit high-potassium foods like bananas, avocados, beans, and ultra-processed foods which often contain potassium additives. A common potassium additive is potassium chloride.
- Check potassium in a food on the label or at MyKidneysMyHealth.com. If the food label says it has less than 3% of your potassium daily value, that is considered low.
- Take medicines that help lower potassium, like binders or water pills (if your doctor says so)
- Check your medicines—some can raise potassium (like certain blood pressure pills)

Nutrition Facts			
2 servings per container			
Serving size		1 cup (255g)	
	Per serving	Per container	
Calories	220	440	
	% DV*	% DV*	
Total Fat	5g	6%	10g 13%
Saturated Fat	2g	10%	4g 20%
Trans Fat	0g		0g
Cholesterol	15mg	5%	30mg 10%
Sodium	240mg	10%	480mg 21%
Total Carb.	35g	13%	70g 25%
Dietary Fiber	6g	21%	12g 43%
Total Sugars	7g		14g
Incl. Added Sugars	4g	8%	8g 16%
Protein	9g		18g
Vitamin D	5mcg	25%	10mcg 50%
Calcium	200mg	15%	400mg 30%
Iron	1mg	6%	2mg 10%
Potassium	470mg	10%	940mg 20%

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

Source: FDA

Mineral and Bone Disorder

Kidneys help keep vitamin D and minerals like calcium balanced.

How You Might Feel

- Itchy skin
- Weak or painful bones
- Heart or nerve problems

How Your Doctor Finds Out

Blood tests check your minerals, vitamins, phosphorus and parathyroid hormone levels.

What You Can Do

- Take prescription-activated vitamin D and other medicines.
- Follow a low-phosphorous diet by avoiding ultra-processed foods and drinks (with phosphorus preservatives added)
 - Look up foods on [MyKidneysMyHealth.com](https://www.mylidneysmyhealth.com) or look in the ingredient list for words with “phos-” in them.
- Do exercises your doctor suggests to strengthen your bones. You may need physical therapy.



Did You Know?

Phosphorus can be added to foods as a preservative or can be found naturally in foods. **It is most important to avoid the added phosphorus found in ultra-processed foods** because the body absorbs this very easily. Avoid:

- Dark cola drinks
- Processed meats
- Processed food (canned or boxed)
- Fast foods
- Frozen meals

Look for ingredients with “phos”, like

- phosphoric acid
- sodium phosphate
- calcium phosphate
- pyrophosphate
- hexametaphosphate



Listen up: How to lower potassium and phosphorus content in foods

1. **Boil a pot of water. Let it cool slightly.**
2. **Soak uncooked food in the boiled water for 5-10 minutes.**

You can do this with fresh fruit, fresh or canned vegetables, legumes (beans), starches (like potatoes), and raw meat or fish.

Fluid Overload

When kidneys don't remove fluid well, it builds up in your body. Fluid overload can also happen if someone has a diagnosis of heart failure, which is common among people with chronic kidney disease. In some cases, too much fluid in the body can hurt the kidneys.

How You Might Feel

- Swelling in feet, hands, or face
- Weight gain
- Shortness of breath
- Cramps or headache
- Belly bloating

How Your Doctor Finds Out

Your doctor will check your body for signs of extra fluid. Sometimes a blood test called BNP (brain natriuretic peptide) will be ordered to check for fluid problems. BNP is a type of hormone. Your heart muscles may release BNP if you have too much fluid in your body.

What You Can Do

- Only take in the amount of salt and fluids that your doctor recommends.
- Avoid high sodium foods like boiled seafood, pickles, and processed or cured meats (deli meat, sausage, bacon, hot dogs), etc.
- Patients with heart failure and CKD usually need to limit the amount of fluid they take in and log their weight every day.
 - **Always measure or read the label – don't guess!**
 - Report any weight gain of more than 3 pounds in a single day, or 5 pounds in 3 days.
- Take medicines called diuretics (water pills), if your doctor tells you to.
- Read all food and drink labels to look for fluid or sodium content.



Helpful Tip

Look for foods with **5% or less of sodium**, which are considered "low sodium."

Common fluid portions

1 Cup	1 Large Mug	1 Can	1 XL Fountain Drink
			
8 fluid ounces	10-12 fluid ounces	12 fluid ounces	32 fluid ounces

Uremia

Waste builds up in your blood because your kidneys are not working well.

How You Might Feel

- Tired or weak
- Loss of appetite or weight loss
- Nausea or vomiting
- Shortness of breath
- Trouble focusing
- Urinating less

How Your Doctor Finds Out

This is diagnosed by your symptoms and your blood results. A blood test called BUN (blood urea nitrogen) checks for waste in your blood. A blood test also checks for creatinine and low estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR).

What You Can Do

- Your doctor may give you medicine.
- If uremia is advanced, you may need dialysis or a kidney transplant.



Talk to Your Doctor

Talk to your doctor about any new symptoms or concerns. Managing CKD well can help you feel better and stay stronger.



Dialysis, Kidney Transplant and Medical Management

If your kidneys get worse, you might need dialysis or a transplant. You may also choose medical management.

- **Peritoneal dialysis** is done every night at home while you sleep.
- **Hemodialysis** is usually done three times a week in a center or more often at home.
- **Kidney Transplant** - You can get on the kidney transplant list if your kidney function is low enough. You do not need to be on dialysis to get a kidney transplant.
- **Conservative management** – also called medical management – does not involve dialysis or kidney transplant. While this treatment plan does not extend your life, it aims to manage symptoms and help you live as well as you can with kidney failure.

Depression

Feeling sad or worried is common with CKD, especially among individuals with other illnesses like diabetes.

How You Might Feel

- Sad or angry
- Crying more
- Losing interest in things
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sleeping too much or too little

How Your Doctor Finds Out

Tell your doctor if you have felt down or anxious, or if you have lost interest in things you normally enjoy. If you or a family member notice changes in your mood, sleep, or energy, talk to your provider. These are common among people with CKD and other chronic health problems.

Your symptoms may be different from the list above.

What You Can Do

- Your doctor may suggest therapy, support groups, or medicine.



Did You Know?

If you'd like to talk to others with CKD, sign up for the National Kidney Foundation's **peer mentor program** at [kidney.org/peers](https://www.kidney.org/peers).

Ochsner also hosts a **support group** to offer ongoing education and peer support to individuals with CKD.

Malnutrition

Many people with severe CKD lose their appetite or become so worried about eating the wrong foods that they stop eating and do not take in enough nutrients. This is called malnutrition.

How You Might Feel

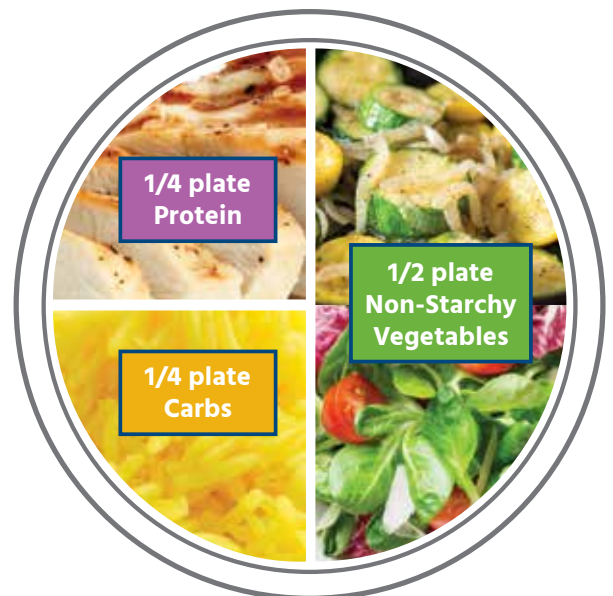
- Tired
- Weight loss
- Swelling

How Your Doctor Finds Out

Blood tests check protein (albumin) levels.

What You Can Do

Eat healthy meals planned with a registered dietitian that specializes in chronic kidney disease.



My CKD Plate

Changes in Daily Activities

Because of symptoms like fatigue (from anemia or depression) or weakness (from malnutrition), people with CKD may find it harder to do day-to-day tasks.

How You Might Feel

- Trouble walking or dressing
- Difficulty with self-care, like bathing or preparing meals
- Sexual problems

How Your Doctor Finds Out

Tell your doctor or family if you have trouble doing your daily tasks.

What You Can Do

Your care team can help make a plan to connect you to resources (like physical therapy, if needed) or treat the underlying causes.

Find out more. Watch your lab results.

Problem	How your doctor finds out	What to look for
Anemia (low blood count)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CBC • Iron and TIBC • Ferritin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hemoglobin • Saturated iron • Ferritin
Metabolic acidosis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive Metabolic Panel (CMP) • Basic Metabolic Panel (BMP) • Renal Function Panel (RFP) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CO2
Hyperkalemia (high potassium)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive Metabolic Panel • Renal Function Panel • Basic Metabolic Panel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potassium
Mineral & Bone Disorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete Blood Count • Comprehensive Metabolic Panel • Renal Function Panel • Parathyroid Hormone (PTH) • Vitamin D 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parathyroid Hormone (PTH) • Vitamin D • Calcium • Phosphorous
Fluid Overload	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical exam of your body to look for swelling and other signs • Blood test (Brain Natriuretic Peptide - BNP) 	<p><i>For patients with Heart Failure:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measure daily weights • Check for swelling • BNP (not for everyone)
Malnutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive Metabolic Panel • Renal Function Panel • Trend weights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Albumin • Weight over time



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