

Staying healthy

before evaluation and while you wait for a transplant

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How do I take care of my body before my transplant?

There are many things you can do to keep your body as healthy as possible while you wait for a transplant. This includes eating right, taking all meds as prescribed, exercising—if your doctor says it is safe, and losing weight if you need to.

What is good nutrition before transplant?

Nutrition plays an important role in preparing you for your transplant as well as keeping you healthy after you receive a transplant. These recommendations are general, so they may not all apply to you. It is important to have nutrition information specified to your own needs and requirements—just like you would with medicine that is prescribed for you. If you are on dialysis, each dialysis unit has a dietitian who will help you make the right food choices. If you are not yet on dialysis, ask your physician to refer you to a dietitian who specializes in nutrition for people who have chronic kidney disease. If you are unsure if any of the below apply to you, ask your dietitian or doctor.

TIP You must notify your transplant team if:

- You have a change in phone, address, insurance or dialysis
- You receive a blood transfusion or were hospitalized or went to the ER

Protein nutrition

Maintaining good protein levels is important for everyone planning to get a kidney transplant. If you eat poorly and become protein malnourished, you are at higher risk of infection and complications both before and after transplantation.

Cholesterol and heart health

People who have kidney disease, including people who get kidney transplants, are at higher risk for developing heart disease. Heart disease can happen when you have too much cholesterol in your blood. The cholesterol can stick to the walls of your arteries, which narrows or even blocks them. High cholesterol can often be controlled with diet (e.g. DASH diet), exercise, and sometimes meds. If you are not sure if you have high cholesterol, ask your doctor.

Renal diet

Many kidney patients follow the renal diet, which includes eating foods that are low in sodium (salt), avoiding high-potassium foods like bananas and beans, and limiting consumption of foods high in phosphorus, such as dairy products. The National Kidney Foundation provides recipes and info about proper nutrition for each kidney disease stage and for transplant patients. Visit [kidney.org/nutrition](https://www.kidney.org/nutrition) for more information. Always talk with your doctor before making a change in your diet.

Why is bone health a concern for kidney patients?

A type of bone disease called **secondary hyperparathyroidism** is common with people who have kidney disease, particularly people who are already on dialysis. In this disease, levels of parathyroid hormone (or PTH) are elevated. High levels of PTH can lead to weakened and painful bones as well as an increased risk for heart disease. If severe, this problem can continue after transplantation. It can be controlled with diet and certain meds. Ask your doctor if this problem affects you and what you can do to prevent or control it.



Will being overweight affect my ability to receive a transplant?

If you are overweight or obese, contact your physician or dietitian to help you with starting a weight control and exercise program. Obesity is an issue that transplant surgeons take very seriously. Your body mass index (BMI) is critical in deciding whether you are eligible for transplant.

TIP Ideally, most candidates should have a BMI of 30 or less. This will be calculated at your evaluation appointment.

There is not a specific weight that will exclude you from being a good candidate, but being very overweight increases the risk for complications after transplant. People who are obese may experience more problems with infections, pneumonia, surgical difficulties, and difficulty healing after transplant surgery. In addition, obesity puts you at higher risk for developing diabetes and heart disease after transplantation.

Your surgeon will assess your risk as part of your evaluation appointment. It is possible the surgeon will require you to lose weight before transplantation. In some cases, you may be placed on a medical hold until a specified weight goal has been achieved. While on hold, you will not receive organ offers.

What can I do if I need to lose weight?

Check with your doctor before starting any weight loss or exercise program. It is also important, especially for people with kidney diseases, to check with your doctor before trying any “quick fixes” like diet pills or herbal preparations. Some of these “natural” supplements can do more harm than good.

It is important to identify the reason you are struggling with your weight. People become overweight or obese from eating more calories than they burn. Some things that may lead to this imbalance include:

- Diets high in fats and simple carbohydrates.
- Lack of physical activity.
- A family history of overweight or obesity.
- Negative emotions like boredom, sadness or anger, which may influence eating habits.

Common weight loss programs may include the following:

- Diet. Steady weight loss of about one pound a week is the safest way to lose weight. Your doctor can refer you to a registered dietitian if you need help in planning your diet.
- Regular exercise.

Behavior modification techniques such as:

- Keep a food diary of everything you eat.
- Shop from a list and do not shop when you're hungry.
- Take a different route if you usually pass by a tempting fast food place.
- Ask for a referral to a registered dietitian if you need help in planning your meals.

If I am well enough, should I exercise?

In the past, it was thought that people with kidney disease would not be able to do vigorous activities. We know now that patients who decide to follow an exercise program are stronger and have more energy.

Before beginning any exercise program, be sure to check with your doctor. With exercise, it becomes easier to get around, do necessary tasks and still have energy left over for other activities you enjoy. In addition to increased energy, other benefits from exercise may include:

- Improved muscle functioning.
- Better blood pressure control.
- Improved muscle strength.
- Lowered level of fats in your blood.
- Better sleep.
- Better control of body weight.

Choose a continuous activity such as walking, swimming, bicycling (indoors or outdoors), skiing, aerobic dancing or any other activities in which you need to move large muscle groups continuously. Low-level strengthening exercises may also be beneficial as part of your program. Design your program to use low weights and high repetitions, and avoid heavy lifting.

Ways to stay hopeful

At times, you may feel frustrated or sad during your journey. This is normal. Look around you for sources of comfort, whether that be someone in your social support system, or doing an activity you enjoy. Here are some tips to help you stay hopeful as you wait for your transplant or adjust to life post-transplant:

Talk to someone.

Talk to a friend or family member about what's on your mind. Or connect with your social worker or a counselor or therapist. If you need help finding one, your care team can connect you.

Know that you are not a burden.

Many kidney patients fear becoming a burden to their loved ones and friends. However, being truthful about your physical and mental health will help your support network to be there for you and allow your team to take better care of you.

Be an empowered patient.

Sometimes it can be overwhelming when it seems like things are out of your control. Instead, try to focus on the things you can do, like asking informed questions, learning about your kidney disease, being prepared for your clinic visits, and even accomplishing small projects like organizing part of your home or trying out a new recipe.

Know your limit.

As your kidney disease progresses, you might start to feel sicker. Try to accept that you may not be able to do everything you once did, and allow yourself to ask for help when you need it.

We know the wait for a transplant can be long, but keep in mind these few things to lift your spirits up:

- Getting a kidney transplant will drastically improve your health and quality of life.
- After your transplant, you will start feeling better and be able to go back to things you enjoyed doing like exercising and not needing to limit your diet as much.
- You can go back to doing things you didn't have time for while on dialysis.
- Your support system is always there for you.
- Your transplant care team is always doing everything they can to make sure your journey is as smooth as possible and you can always reach out to them about questions or concerns.

Your kidney transplant will give you more energy and strength to live your life the way you want!

