

Kidney Cancer: Overview



What is kidney cancer?

Cancer is made of changed cells that grow out of control. The changed (abnormal) cells often grow to form a lump or mass called a tumor. Cancer cells can also grow into (invade) nearby areas. And they can spread to other parts of the body. This is called metastasis.

Cancer that starts in the kidney is called kidney or renal cancer. The kidneys are two bean-shaped organs. Each is about the size of a bar of soap. They sit in the body toward the middle to lower part of the back. There is one kidney on each side of the spine. The kidneys help filter waste and excess fluid from the blood.

The most common type of kidney cancer is called renal cell carcinoma. About 90% of kidney cancer tumors are this type. Other less common types of kidney cancers are:

- Urothelial cell carcinoma
- Wilms tumor
- Renal sarcoma

Who is at risk for kidney cancer?

A risk factor is anything that may increase your chance of having a disease. The exact cause of someone's cancer may not be known. But risk factors can make it more likely for a person to have cancer. Some risk factors may not be in your control. But others may be things you can change.

The risk factors for kidney cancer include:

- Older age
- Being a man
- Being black
- Smoking
- Obesity
- Misuse of certain medicines, such as over-the-counter pain relievers
- Contact with certain chemicals, such as the metal cadmium, herbicides, and organic solvents
- High blood pressure
- Advanced or chronic kidney disease
- Certain inherited conditions, such as von Hippel-Lindau disease and hereditary papillary renal cell carcinoma
- Family history of kidney cancer

Talk with your healthcare provider about your risk factors for kidney cancer and what you can do about those that can be controlled.

Can kidney cancer be prevented?

You may be able to lower your risk for kidney cancer by making some lifestyle changes. These include:

- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Not smoking
- Keeping blood pressure in a healthy range

Are there screening tests for kidney cancer?

There are no recommended screening tests for kidney cancer for people of average risk. Screening tests are done to check for disease in people who don't have symptoms.

You may want to think about genetic testing and kidney cancer screening if you have a family history of kidney cancer or other disorders linked to the disease.

Your healthcare provider may advise you to get screened often for kidney cancer if genetic tests show a risk for kidney cancer. There are no standard guidelines for how often you should be screened if you are at increased risk. Your healthcare provider will advise a screening schedule based on your overall health and risk factors.

What are the symptoms of kidney cancer?

Kidney cancer often causes no symptoms in its early stages. As the cancer grows, it can cause:

- Blood in the urine
- Pain in the side or lower back
- A lump in the kidney area
- Chronic tiredness
- Fast weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Swelling of the legs and ankles
- Fever

Many of these symptoms may be caused by other health problems. It is important to see a healthcare provider for a diagnosis. Only a healthcare provider can tell if you have cancer.

How is kidney cancer diagnosed?

You will need certain exams and tests to be sure if your healthcare provider thinks you may have kidney cancer. Your healthcare provider will ask you about your health history, your symptoms, risk factors, and family history of disease. They will also give you a physical exam. You may also have one or more of these tests:

- Urine test
- Blood tests
- CT scan
- Abdominal ultrasound
- MRI scan
- Angiography
- Biopsy

You'll likely have other tests after a diagnosis of kidney cancer. These help your healthcare providers learn more about the cancer. They can help determine the stage of the cancer. The stage is how much and how far the cancer has spread (metastasized) in your body. It is one of the most important things to know when deciding how to treat the cancer.

Your healthcare provider will talk with you about what the stage means for your treatment once your cancer is staged. Ask your healthcare provider to explain the stage of your cancer to you in a way you can understand.

How is kidney cancer treated?

Your treatment choices depend on the type of kidney cancer you have, test results, and the stage of the cancer. The goal of treatment may be to cure you or to control the cancer. Or to help ease problems caused by the cancer. Talk with your healthcare team about your treatment choices, the goals of treatment. Find out what the risks and side effects may be. Other things to think about are if the cancer can be removed with surgery and your overall health.

Types of treatment for cancer are either local or systemic. Local treatments remove, destroy, or control cancer cells in one area. Systemic treatment is used to destroy or control cancer cells that may have traveled around your body. Surgery, ablation, and radiation are local treatments. Targeted therapy, immunotherapy, and chemotherapy are systemic treatments when taken by pill or injection. You may have just one treatment or a combination of treatments.

Kidney cancer may be treated with:

- Surgery
- Ablation therapy
- Radiation therapy
- Active surveillance
- Targeted therapy
- Immunotherapy
- Chemotherapy
- Supportive care

Talk with your healthcare providers about your treatment choices. Make a list of questions. Think about the benefits and possible side effects of each choice. Talk about your concerns with your healthcare provider before making a decision.

What are treatment side effects?

Cancer treatment, such as chemotherapy and radiation, can damage normal cells. This can cause side effects. These include hair loss, mouth sores, and vomiting.

Talk with your healthcare provider about side effects you might have and ways to manage them. There may be things you can do and medicines you can take to help prevent or control side effects.

Coping with kidney cancer

Many people feel worried, depressed, and stressed when dealing with cancer. Getting treatment for cancer can be tough on the mind and body. Keep talking with your healthcare team about any problems or concerns you have. Work together to ease the effect of cancer and its symptoms on your daily life.

Here are tips:

- Talk with your family or friends.
- Ask your healthcare team or social worker for help.
- Speak with a counselor.

- Talk with a spiritual advisor, such as a minister or rabbi.
- Ask your healthcare team about medicines for depression or anxiety.
- Keep socially active.
- Join a cancer support group in person or online.

Cancer treatment is also hard on the body. To help yourself stay healthier, try to:

- Eat a healthy diet, with as many protein foods as possible.
- Drink plenty of water, fruit juices, and other liquids.
- Keep physically active.
- Rest as much as needed.
- Talk with your healthcare team about ways to manage treatment side effects.
- Take your medicines as directed by your team.

When should I call my healthcare provider?

Your healthcare provider will talk with you about when to call. You may be told to call if any of the following occur:

- New symptoms or symptoms that get worse
- Signs of an infection, such as a fever
- Side effects of treatment that affect your daily function or don't get better with treatment

Ask your healthcare provider what signs to watch for and when to call. Know how to get help after office hours and on weekends and holidays.

Next steps

Tips to help you get the most from a visit to your healthcare provider:

- Know the reason for your visit and what you want to happen.
- Before your visit, write down questions you want answered.
- Bring someone with you to help you ask questions and remember what your provider tells you.
- At the visit, write down the name of a new diagnosis, and any new medicines, treatments, or tests. Also write down any new instructions your provider gives you.
- Know why a new medicine or treatment is prescribed, and how it will help you. Also know what the side effects are and when they should be reported.
- Ask if your condition can be treated in other ways.
- Know why a test or procedure is recommended and what the results could mean.
- Know what to expect if you do not take the medicine or have the test or procedure.
- If you have a follow-up appointment, write down the date, time, and purpose for that visit.
- Know how you can contact your healthcare provider if you have questions, especially after office hours and on weekends.

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