

Kidney Cancer (Renal Cell Carcinoma)

What is kidney cancer?

Kidney cancer is the growth of abnormal cells in the kidney. Growths of cancer cells are called tumors. Renal cell cancer (or renal cell carcinoma) is the most common type of kidney cancer. The kidneys are located on either side of the spine in the back, just above the waist. They make urine by taking waste products and extra salt and water from the blood. They also help control blood pressure.

How does it occur?

The cause of this disease is not known. It happens mostly in adults who are over 40 years old. The risk for kidney cancer is higher if you:

- are male
- smoke
- are very overweight
- have von Hippel-Lindau syndrome (a rare hereditary disease)
- are on long-term kidney dialysis.
- What are the signs and symptoms?
- Signs and symptoms can include:
- blood in the urine (most common sign)
- a lump that can be felt in the belly or side
- pain in the lower back or side (flank pain) that does not go away
- loss of appetite
- unexpected weight loss
- tiredness
- fever and night sweats

Many of these signs and symptoms can also be caused by urinary infections or other problems. Make sure that you tell your healthcare provider about your symptoms so the cause can be found as soon as possible.

How is it diagnosed?

Kidney cancer may be hard to diagnose. Sometimes kidney tumors are found when X-rays are taken for other reasons. Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and examine you. Tests may be done to look at the kidneys and see how well they are working. The tests may include:

- blood tests to check for infection, anemia, and kidney function
- intravenous pyelogram (an X-ray test also called an IVP that uses a dye to make the kidney show up)
- ultrasound of the kidneys
- CT scan or MRI of the kidneys

- arteriogram (a special X-ray of the arteries and veins of the kidneys).

How is it treated?

The treatment for renal cell cancer depends on:

- how large the tumor is
- whether the tumor has spread to other parts of the body
- your overall health.
- The usual treatment is surgery to remove all or part of the kidney. Other possible treatments are:
 - Renal artery embolization, a procedure that is done to block blood flow to the cancerous kidney. The tumor may then get smaller and easier to remove. This procedure may also be done to help to relieve symptoms, such as pain and bloody urine, when surgery is not possible.
 - Radiation therapy, which is the use of high-energy rays to kill cancer cells, is sometimes used before surgery to shrink the tumor. Rarely, it is used after surgery to kill cancer cells that may still be in the area where the tumor was. Radiation treatment can also help relieve pain caused by spread of the cancer to other areas, such as the bones or brain.
 - Biological therapy, which helps the body's own defenses fight the cancer. It is used when the cancer has spread to other parts of the body.

How long will the effects last?

The chances of cure depend on how big the tumor is and whether it has spread to other parts of the body. If the cancer has not spread to nearby lymph nodes or other organs, the long-term survival rates after removal of the kidney cancer are good. Most people can live with just 1 kidney if the other is removed. With dialysis, you can live without both kidneys. If the disease has spread to other organs, surgery to remove the kidney is not as helpful. After treatment your provider will recommend regular checkups to follow your recovery and to see if the cancer has come back or spread. These checkups may include lab tests, X-rays, and scans. It is important to follow your provider's recommendations for checkups so that any problems can be found early.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow the full course of treatment prescribed by your healthcare provider.

Eat a healthy diet.

Know that having the cancer adds a lot of stress to your life. Take more time for your important relationships and for rest. Spend time with people and activities you enjoy.

Talk with your family and your healthcare providers about your concerns. Ask your healthcare provider any questions you have about the disease, treatments, side effects of the treatments, sexuality, support groups, and anything else that concerns you.

Ask your provider about some alternative methods for pain control, such as relaxation techniques, guided imagery, and hypnosis.

Find a counselor to help you deal with hard issues.

For more information on cancer, contact national and local organizations such as:

American Cancer Society, Inc. Phone: 800-ACS-2345 (800-227-2345)

Web site: <http://www.cancer.org>

National Cancer Institute Phone: 1-800-4CANCER, or 1-800-422-6237 (TTY: 1-800-332-8615)

Web site: <http://www.cancer.gov>

How can I help prevent kidney cancer?

Limit or prevent, if possible, your exposure to cigarette smoke, which appears to make the risk for this disease higher.

Eat a lot of fruits and vegetables.

Have regular checkups to check your general health.

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