

Poor kidney health not written in stone

By Luis Gimenez, M.D.

Special to the Review

Kidney stones are a common problem for many people. In fact, more than half a million go to the emergency room each year because of kidney stones.

These stones can cause a lot of discomfort and once you've had one, you're at an increased risk for another. Your chances of developing kidney disease are also greater. So, it's important to understand what causes kidney stones and how to prevent them.

How do stones start?

When the amount of water, salt and other substances in your urine get out of balance, small crystals begin to form.

These crystals may then stick together to form what is called a kidney stone. These stones can be small and may easily pass through your body without you even noticing them. Other times, they can be large and cause discomfort, severe pain, obstruction and even bleeding.

Certain medicines, some types of kidney disease and having a family history for kidney stones may also increase your risk for developing this condition.

Treatment options

The treatment for kidney stones usually depends on their size and location within the urinary tract.

Stones can be treated with medications or diet changes, as well as drinking plenty of water to increase urine volume, which helps dilute the salts contained in urine that could lead to the growth of new stones.

If you have a large kidney stone or it is blocking your urinary tract, your doctor may break it into small pieces using minimally invasive wave technology, so it can pass through your body safely.

Prevention

The best advice for dealing with kidney stones is to prevent them before they start. Here are some healthy tips:

- Drink plenty of fluids - especially water - so that your urine color is clear to light yellow.

- Get the right amount of calcium in your diet. Talk to your doctor about how much is appropriate for your age.

Consuming large amounts of calcium and/or vitamin D supplements is not a good idea if you have kidney stones.

- Reduce the amount of salt in your diet by avoiding processed sandwich meats, canned soups, packaged meals and even some sports drinks.

- Limit the amount of protein you eat from red meat, poultry, eggs and seafood.

- Avoid certain foods, especially if you are at risk for kidney stones, such as colas, beets, chocolate, spinach, rhubarb, tea, and most nuts.

If you have any symptoms of kidney stones - such as pain or blood while urinating, constant pain in your back or lower abdomen, nausea or vomiting, fever or chills, or urine that smells bad or looks cloudy - see your doctor right away.

Your kidney health means a lot more than dealing with the occasional discomfort of a kidney stone. It's about keeping these important organs working properly for a lifetime of good health.

Luis Gimenez, M.D., is the chief of the Division of Nephrology at MedStar Good Samaritan Hospital. The hospital is the largest, not-for-profit kidney dialysis provider in Maryland. Their commitment to providing high-quality care and promoting kidney health education and awareness was recognized by the Mid-Atlantic Renal Coalition when the hospital was designated a 5 Diamond Facility. For more information about kidney care or a referral, visit MedStarGoodSam.org/KidneyCare or call 443-444-4100.