

**FACT SHEET:**

# Looking after your kidneys

Looking after your kidneys is very important when you have diabetes. People with diabetes are more likely to develop kidney problems. You can reduce the risk by managing your diabetes and having regular kidney checks and timely treatment. Kidney problems cause less damage when detected and treated early.

Your kidneys filter your blood to get rid of waste and toxins from your body. They also regulate your blood pressure. Having healthy kidneys helps keep your body in good condition and improves your general wellbeing.

Kidney disease (also known as nephropathy) is common in people with diabetes. Having high blood pressure and blood glucose levels above target for a long time can damage the small blood vessels (also known as microvascular disease) in your kidneys. This causes the small blood vessels to leak and not filter the blood properly. This means the kidneys do not work as well as they should.

If you have kidney disease, you may also be more likely to have other diabetes-related complications, such as heart disease and damage to the nerves and eyes.

## Signs and symptoms of kidney disease

In the early stages of kidney disease, you may not be aware of any signs or symptoms. That is why it is important to have regular kidney checks as part of your annual diabetes health check.

As kidney disease worsens, there may be changes in the colour of your urine, how often you pass urine, or how much urine you pass. Other late signs and symptoms may include tiredness, loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, headaches, loss of concentration, shortness of breath, swollen ankles, nausea, and vomiting.

### How can your doctor help?

Kidney problems must be picked up as soon as possible. Early detection is the best way to prevent more damage.

- If you have type 2 diabetes, have your urine and blood checked by your doctor for early kidney damage when first diagnosed with diabetes. After that, have your kidneys checked every 12 months to look for early signs of damage.
- If you or your child have type 1 diabetes, speak to your doctor about when to start having your/their kidney checked.
- Ask your doctor how often you should have your kidneys checked, as they may recommend more frequent checks. This is very important if you already have damage to your kidneys or are planning a pregnancy.
- Your urine sample will be checked by a pathology lab for a protein called albumin. If small amounts of albumin are detected, this is known as microalbuminuria. Microalbuminuria is an early sign that the blood vessels in the kidney are being damaged and leaking protein.
- A blood test that measures the rate at which your kidneys filter blood and how well they are working. Aim to have this test done every year.

### How is kidney disease treated?

Keeping your blood pressure and blood glucose within the recommended target ranges reduces the rate of damage to the kidneys. Your doctor may prescribe medication to lower your blood pressure and protect your kidneys, even if your readings are in the target range.

If you have kidney damage, your doctor will review your medications. Some medications for diabetes and for other conditions, need to be changed or stopped when there is kidney damage. Your doctor may reduce the dose or prescribe a different type of medication.

You may need to change the amount of protein, and other food groups, in your diet to help look after your kidneys. A dietitian can help you make changes and work out a meal plan that suits your needs.

### Looking after your kidneys

There are several things you can do to reduce your risk kidney of problems.

**Keep your blood glucose levels within the target range.** Over time, high blood glucose levels damage the small vessels in the kidneys.

**Keep your blood pressure as close to the target range as possible.** Aim for 140/90 or less. Your doctor will advise you on a blood pressure target to meet your individual health needs.

**Do regular physical activity.** This is a great way to reduce your blood pressure. Aim for 30 minutes on all or most days of the week. Check with your doctor before starting a new physical activity program.

**Reduce your salt (sodium) intake.** Choose foods low in salt, use salt-reduced products, and limit how much salt you add to foods. Ask a dietitian for advice.

**Do not smoke.** If you do, try to quit. Smoking increases your blood pressure and causes damage to the small vessels of the kidneys, which may increase the risk of kidney problems. Ask for help if you feel you cannot give up smoking on your own. Talk to your doctor or call the Quitline on **137 848**.

**If you think you have a bladder or kidney infection, contact your doctor immediately.** Symptoms can include cloudy or bloody urine, feeling the need to or passing urine more often, and/or a 'burning' feeling when passing urine.

**Choose water as the best everyday drink.** If you have existing kidney disease, ask for specific advice on how much water to drink every day.

Speak to your doctor or diabetes health professional about what you can do to help keep your kidneys healthy.

Speak to your doctor, psychologist or social worker if the health of your kidneys is causing you worry or anxiety.



## More information and support

- Go to [ndss.com.au](https://www.ndss.com.au) to search for the 'Annual cycle of care', 'Diabetes-related complications' and other fact sheets.
- Go to [ndss.com.au/annual-cycle-of-care-podcasts](https://www.ndss.com.au/annual-cycle-of-care-podcasts) and listen to Episode 4 Kidney health, and other episodes in the Annual Cycle of Care podcast series.
- Go to [ndss.com.au](https://www.ndss.com.au) to access the Ready, Set, Go-Let's Move online program and to search for other NDSS programs and services in your state or territory, or online.
- Call the NDSS Helpline on **1800 637 600** and ask to speak to a dietitian.
- Go to [dietitiansaustralia.org.au](https://www.dietitiansaustralia.org.au) to find a dietitian or call Dietitians Australia on **1800 812 942**.
- For more information about kidney health, go to [kidney.org.au](https://www.kidney.org.au).



## Top tips

- Work with your diabetes health professionals to keep your blood glucose levels and blood pressure as close to your target ranges as possible.
- Ask your doctor how often you should have a kidney check.
- Speak to your doctor or diabetes health professional about what you can do to help keep your kidneys healthy.
- Contact your doctor immediately if you think you have a bladder or kidney infection.

## Notes

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## The NDSS and you

Whether you have just been diagnosed with diabetes, or have been living with diabetes for a while, the NDSS provides a range of support services, information, and subsidised products to help you manage your diabetes, stay healthy and live well. For access to more resources (including translated versions), or to find out more about support services, go to [ndss.com.au](https://www.ndss.com.au) or call the NDSS Helpline on **1800 637 700**.

This information is intended as a guide only. It should not replace individual medical advice and if you have any concerns about your health or further questions, you should contact your health professional.