

Early Stage CKD and Diet

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What is a Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) non-dialysis diet?

A CKD non-dialysis diet is for people diagnosed with an early stage of chronic kidney disease (CKD). There are 5 stages of CKD—stages 1 through 4 are before dialysis is needed, and stage 5 is when dialysis or a transplant is required. Over time, CKD damages the kidneys’ ability to filter waste and excess fluid from the body. Your kidneys may become less effective at doing their jobs, and you may not be feeling as well. The CKD non-dialysis diet is designed to help the kidneys keep as much of their remaining function for as long as possible. This diet also helps reduce the buildup of excess fluid and waste products.

What can I eat?

On the CKD non-dialysis diet, you can eat a variety of foods. Depending on your lab results, body size, symptoms, stage of CKD, age, activity level and other health conditions, your renal dietitian will make sure you are on an eating plan that is best suited for you. This nutritious eating plan will feature a prescribed amount of high-quality protein. Nutritious carbohydrates, such as those found in grains, fruits and vegetables are encouraged. Healthy fats such as canola oil and olive oil may be increased for added calories. Based on your individual needs, your dietitian will adjust the amount of carbohydrates, protein and fat you can eat in a day.

What can't I eat?

At stages 3 and 4 CKD, your protein intake may be limited. The amount depends on your body size and kidney function. You may be instructed to limit high-phosphorus foods or processed foods that contain phosphate additives. A low-sodium diet is also recommended to help with blood pressure control. Although you may be instructed to eat more carbohydrates and fats to meet your calorie needs, carbohydrates and fats with little nutritive value (such as candy, soda, animal fats and processed foods) should only be a small part of your diet. If you have other health conditions such as diabetes, high cholesterol or high blood pressure, you may be advised to restrict the amount of sugar, saturated fat and salt you eat.

Why do I have to eat this way?

The goal of the CKD non-dialysis diet is to preserve existing kidney function and delay the later stages of CKD, particularly stage 5, which is also called end stage renal disease (ESRD). This is the stage when dialysis or a kidney transplant becomes necessary in order to live. Controlling blood pressure and blood sugar may help your kidneys last longer.



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How does this diet help?

In people with CKD, reducing the amount of protein you eat protects the kidneys by protecting the tiny filtering units in your kidneys. A diet high in protein causes an increase in blood flow and blood pressure in the kidneys. Over time, damage to the small blood vessels occurs, including blood vessel enlargement and inflammation, and protein loss in the urine. Cutting back on protein reduces the amount of protein waste kidneys process and reduces stress on the kidneys.

High blood pressure can make kidney disease worse by damaging the small blood vessels inside the kidneys. Uncontrolled high blood pressure can also cancel out the benefits of a restricted protein diet. Choosing foods low in sodium can help control blood pressure and keep kidneys healthy. Taking blood pressure medicines prescribed by your doctor also helps.

If you have diabetes, blood glucose, or blood sugar control is critical in preserving kidney function. Too much blood sugar can damage small blood vessels and cause them to leak protein from the blood into the urine. Over time, some of these leaky vessels will fail, placing even more pressure on the vessels that are still open. This increased workload continues to damage the remaining vessels. Studies have shown that keeping glucose levels normal helps delay the progression of kidney disease, keeping kidneys healthier longer.

One concern when following a restricted protein diet is preventing protein malnutrition. It is important to see your dietitian and doctor on a regular basis so they can monitor your protein status.

The CKD non-dialysis diet is formulated with your optimal health in mind. You can get a great balance of vitamins and minerals from all sorts of foods. Your kidneys will benefit, and your overall health will, too.

What about fluid intake?

In the early stages of CKD, you will be able to drink your normal amount of fluid. If you notice swelling, this may be a sign of fluid retention. It may result from eating high-sodium foods or from decreased kidney function. Your doctor and renal dietitian will monitor your condition and recommend adjustments to your diet and medications as needed.

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How long do I have to follow the CKD non-dialysis diet?

You will need to follow the CKD non-dialysis diet as long as your doctor and dietitian recommend. The diet may be changed over time to meet your health needs and reflect any changes to your condition.

How do I know if the CKD non-dialysis diet is working?

If your kidney disease was diagnosed at an early stage, you may not notice any changes to the way you feel on the CKD non-dialysis diet. This is because the earliest stages of kidney disease lack obvious physical symptoms. You may not have even felt ill when you were first diagnosed. If you had symptoms like swelling, you will notice the diet helps improve your symptoms.

Many patients feel the same as they did before they went on the diet. Do not be alarmed because you do not feel different. This does not mean the CKD non-dialysis diet is not working properly. The best indicator that the diet is working will be your lab results.

Your doctor will conduct a creatinine clearance test in order to calculate your glomerular filtration rate (GFR). Your GFR tells you and your doctor how effective your kidneys are at filtering waste and excess fluid from your bloodstream. Carefully following the CKD non-dialysis diet and your dietitian and doctor's advice will help treat CKD.

If I follow the CKD non-dialysis diet will my kidneys keep working?

The CKD non-dialysis diet will help your kidneys by slowing the progression of kidney disease. The diet, however, is not a cure for kidney disease, nor can it reverse the damage already done. CKD continues over time. There may come a point in the disease when your kidneys will stop working. Following the CKD non-dialysis diet and your doctor's advice may help delay that from happening. By not following the CKD non-dialysis diet, however, your kidneys may lose function more quickly and advance to the later stages of kidney disease sooner. Following the diet will help manage blood pressure and blood glucose, which can help preserve kidney function.