Conservative Kidney Management

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Performing dialysis can be a burden for some people. Conservative kidney management focuses on quality of life for the time you have, rather than on trying to live longer with a very poor quality of life that can occur with some patients receiving dialysis. If you choose conservative kidney management, your healthcare team will help you use diet and medication to slow your kidneys' decline, manage any symptoms you may have, and provide support to you and your family.

If you choose conservative kidney management, either because you decide not to start dialysis or because you've decided to stop, you will receive high quality medical care. If needed, your healthcare team will help prepare you for the end of life as your kidney function gets worse.

This brochure addresses concerns you or your family may have. It will help you get ready to talk about this choice with your healthcare team.

Why Would I Choose Not to Have Dialysis Treatments?

Living with an illness like kidney failure can be physically and emotionally challenging. Often, people have many other health complications and dialysis will not help treat these other problems. Depending on your condition, it also may not extend your life. While for many patients, dialysis provides important benefits, for some patients it may cause more harm and suffering overall. Not having dialysis is a personal decision based on what is most important to you.

It's important that you make this choice for the right reasons. Your healthcare team can help you rule out depression or other issues that could be changed to improve your quality of life.

Is Refusing Dialysis Considered Suicide?

Not having dialysis is like any other choice people make about a medical treatment. What makes this decision difficult is that, without dialysis, you may die sooner than if you were to be treated with dialysis. Canadian healthcare standards accept not having dialysis as a treatment choice, as do most religions. You may want to speak with your religious advisor if you're concerned that your faith or culture has a different view.

What's Going to Happen to Me Without Dialysis?

Everyone reacts differently, depending on their medical conditions. You'll need to talk to your doctor about the kind of care you want as your kidneys fail and you begin conservative management. Every patient's needs are different, and every community is different. Depending where you live, homecare special services may be available. Your healthcare team will continue to look after you.

Will My Doctor and Healthcare Team Help Me Decide?

Yes. Your doctor will talk with you about your treatment options. The final decision about dialysis is between you and your healthcare team.

If you haven't had dialysis, you may want to ask your doctor about a trial, where people can go on dialysis to determine what it is like for them. If after this period you feel that dialysis gives you an acceptable quality of life, you can choose to continue treatments. If you feel that it gives little benefit, you can choose to stop dialysis and accept conservative treatment and palliative care if needed. Palliative care can help improve the quality of your life, reduce or relieve symptoms, help you have a more peaceful and dignified death, and support your family and those who care for you. Some people want to be in hospital during this time. Others want to arrange for help and support, so they can die at home.

What If I Choose to Stop Dialysis?

If you are on dialysis and do not feel it gives you the health benefits and quality of life that you wish, you may choose to stop the treatments. This may be a difficult decision because it means preparing for the end of your life. Because each person is unique, no one can say when death will occur. When a person stops dialysis, it could be one to two weeks, or less or more. Your doctor can give you an estimate, but no healthcare professional can accurately say when death will occur.

What If I Am Considering Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD)?

Medical assistance in dying refers to a doctor or nurse practitioner helping an eligible person to voluntarily end their life. The person must meet certain criteria to be eligible for this option.

You do not need to stop dialysis to have medical assistance in dying and you can have help to decide about other services such as palliative care. If you are thinking about medical assistance in dying, talk about it with your doctor or healthcare team. Your doctor or nurse will talk to you about all options that are available to you such as palliative care, symptom control, and other supports. It is important that you know about all available options if you are considering medical assistance in dying.

How Do I Talk about This with My Family and Friends?

The decision not to have dialysis can be a difficult choice to share. It's important to talk about this decision with your loved ones. You may need to help them understand why you made this decision. If you get very sick, your family may have to make treatment decisions for you, so you need to share your feelings with them. Your renal social worker and the rest of your healthcare team can help you prepare for and participate in this important conversation.

Can I Change My Mind and Go on Dialysis?

Yes, you can. If that's what you want, let your doctor or healthcare team know as soon as possible.

What Else Do I Need to Have in Place?

Whether you choose to have dialysis or not, it is recommended to have your will, power of attorney (personal care and finances), advance/personal directives, and funeral arrangements in place. You may also want to talk to your family about your wishes regarding tissue and organ donation. Your renal social worker can tell you about the community resources available to you.

Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Team:

- How will I feel without dialysis?
- Can I try dialysis and then choose to stop?
- Will my healthcare team still look after me?
- How long will I live?
- Can I choose where I die?
- What kind of food and drink can I have?
- If I change my mind, what should I do?
- What can be done if I have any pain or discomfort?
- Who will be there to help support my family?
- Are there alternatives to stopping dialysis?

Feel free to add your own questions and bring this list with you.

Your healthcare team cares about you and your family. Please discuss any of these questions with them.

OUR VISION

The Kidney Foundation of Canada is committed to achieving excellent kidney health, optimal quality of life, and a cure for kidney disease.

OUR MISSION

The Kidney Foundation of Canada is the national volunteer organization committed to eliminating the burden of kidney disease through:

- Funding and stimulating innovative research for better treatments and a cure;
- Providing education and support to prevent kidney disease in those at risk and empower those with kidney disease to optimize their health status;
- Advocating for improved access to high quality healthcare;
- Increasing public awareness and commitment to advancing kidney health and organ donation.

For further information, or to help us in our efforts, please contact The Kidney Foundation office in your area. You can also visit our website at kidney.ca.

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This material is available in accessible formats upon request by contacting info@kidney.ca or calling 1-800-361-7494.

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