

Conservative renal care: what can I expect?

A resource for patients about what to expect

Conservative renal care is a treatment option that provides full kidney care for people with advanced kidney disease. It does not include dialysis.

The focus of conservative renal care is to keep your kidney function and quality of life for as long as possible. However, it is important to know that without dialysis, your kidneys and your health will naturally decline until end of life.

Who can I talk to?

Your conservative renal care team may include some or all of the following:

- nurse
- social worker
- dietitian
- nephrologist (kidney doctor)
- pharmacist
- other specialists

You may also get support from:

- a care provider who focuses on palliative care
- providers or groups in your community who care for you in your home
- your family doctor, or the person who provides your medical care

How often will I visit a clinic?

How often you visit a clinic will depend on the health of your kidneys, your overall health and your preference.

If you are not able to come to the clinic, ask your conservative renal care team about other arrangements such as home visits or phone calls.

Can I change my mind?

Yes. You have the right to change your mind about your treatment at any time.

Your care team can support you to make an informed decision based on your wishes, values and beliefs.

What could my care include?

You and your family and/or caregivers will regularly talk to your conservative renal care team about your values, goals and wishes for the care you want to receive. Together you will make a plan to address all of your needs throughout your care journey.

This could include:

- actions to delay or minimize further kidney decline
- symptom management
- emotional and psychological care
- social support
- support with daily tasks
- cultural and spiritual care

What kind of support will my family, caregivers and I receive?

Your conservative renal care team may arrange for one or more of the following supports:

- home visits or virtual care (such as telephone or video conference)
- home support programs (such as a personal support worker, home helper, home nurse)
- peer and community support programs (such as in-person day programs or online support groups)

Planning for the end of life will be an important part of the support you will receive. The conservative renal care team will help you make a plan so everyone knows what you have chosen, what your wishes are, suggestions to manage your symptoms and who to call when you need help.

Will I receive dialysis treatment?

No. Dialysis is not included in conservative renal care. Dialysis is a medical procedure that can help replace many of the functions that your kidneys are no longer able to do for you. With conservative renal care, your care is actively managed in other ways, such as medication or lifestyle changes. Conservative renal care is not the same as withdrawal from dialysis or palliative dialysis. For more information, ask your care team.

If you have concerns about not receiving dialysis, consider discussing it with your care team, including a personal spiritual care provider.

How long will I live?

It depends on many factors, such as your overall health, kidney function, diet, and/or other medical conditions.

While dialysis may help some people live longer, there are some cases when conservative renal care can help people live just as long with less intense treatment. Research has shown that people over the age of 75 with declining kidneys and other illnesses can live just as long with conservative renal care as similar people who received dialysis treatment.¹⁻³

As a family member and/or caregiver, how will I be supported when I can no longer meet the needs of the person I care for?

As a family member and/or caregiver, you have your own experience in caring for someone with advanced kidney disease.

The conservative renal care team will support you in delivering care, including providing options for when it becomes too difficult for you to provide patient care. The conservative renal care team will also talk to you about your needs to help you maintain your well-being and prevent burnout.

What type of symptoms could I experience?

As your kidneys and overall health decline, the symptoms you have will vary. There may be times when your symptoms are severe and other times when they are more stable. Your conservative renal care team can help you identify and manage your symptoms. Symptoms may include:

- itchy skin
- weakness and fatigue
- pain and anxiety
- nausea
- shortness of breath

What do I do if I experience sudden distressing symptoms?

As your kidneys and overall health decline, you might have more symptoms or some alarming symptoms (such as feeling short of breath).

To prepare you and your family and/or caregivers, your conservative renal care team will talk to you about what sudden distressing symptoms may look like and what to do if they happen.

Early planning with your conservative renal care team will allow you to clearly describe your needs and preferences so that the conservative renal care team can support you, your family and/or caregivers if you experience distressing symptoms.



For more information on conservative renal care:

ontariorenalnetwork.ca/conservativerenalcare

1. Kurella Tamura, M., et al., Functional status of elderly adults before and after initiation of dialysis. *N Engl J Med*, 2009. 361(16): p. 1539-47.
2. Hussain, J.A., A. Mooney, and L. Russon, Comparison of survival analysis and palliative care involvement in patients aged over 70 years choosing conservative management or renal replacement therapy in advanced chronic kidney disease. *Palliat Med*, 2013. 27(9): p. 829-39.
3. Murtagh, F.E., et al., Dialysis or not? A comparative survival study of patients over 75 years with chronic kidney disease stage 5. *Nephrol Dial Transplant*, 2007. 22(7): p. 1955-62.