Kidney Problems

The kidneys are two bean-shaped organs. They control the amount of acid, salts, chemicals and water in the blood. They control blood pressure and how you get rid of waste. The waste that they remove becomes urine. They are on each side of the spine at the waist level.

Kidney problems are called nephropathy. In a person with HIV, they are called HIV-associated nephropathy (HIVAN). This can cause kidney failure. Another name is renal failure.

Symptoms

By the time problems can be noticed, the kidneys may be greatly damaged. The kidneys do not always heal after they are damaged. Signs include:

- Feeling very tired
- High blood pressure
- Food does not sound good
- Large amounts of urine or very little urine
- Fast heartbeat
- Swollen feet and ankles
- Throwing up

Causes of Kidney Problems

HIV itself causes some kidney problems. These are more likely if a person has advanced AIDS and a low CD4 cell count.

Some HIV medications (meds) can cause kidney problems. This is more likely if a person does not drink enough water.

Risk Factors

The risk of kidney problems rises if a person has:

- A high viral load (4,000 or higher)
- A CD4 count below 200
- Diabetes
- Hepatitis B or C
- High blood pressure

How to Know You Have Kidney Problems

A kidney function test is done when a person first learns they have HIV. The test should be done every year if the risk of kidney problems is high.

Other tests a doctor may order are:

- Urine test. This is the most common way to check the kidneys.
- Blood urea nitrogen (BUN). This checks how much nitrogen is in the blood. The kidneys remove nitrogen from the blood. A high BUN level can be due to a high-protein diet, or kidney or heart failure. It can also go up if you do not drink enough water.
- Creatinine clearance. When creatinine levels go up, it is a sign the kidneys cannot get rid of this compound in the blood. High levels can point to kidney failure.
- An ultrasound. This makes a picture of a kidney inside the body.
- A kidney biopsy. A small piece of kidney tissue is removed for a closer look. This is done putting a needle through the skin to reach the kidney.

Treatment

Treatment depends on the type of kidney disease. It also depends on the person's HIV treatment.

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The doctor may have to change your HIV meds if the kidney disease is severe. HIV meds improve a person's health and prevent infections. They also help keep the kidneys healthy.

You should drink plenty of water and keep your blood pressure low to help the kidneys.

If the kidneys fail, dialysis may be needed. This means that a machine will filter your blood.

A kidney transplant may be an option. A person who has a transplant must be treated to make sure the body accepts the new organ and the immune system works as it should.

When a person has HIV, the meds put more pressure on the immune system. If you take your HIV meds, you will have fewer side effects from the meds you get after a transplant.

Most transplant centers only accept people with a CD4 cell count over 200 and a viral load so low that it can not be measured. The outcomes for people with HIV are about as good as others who get kidney transplants.

For more information
Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call PHP Nurse Advice Line at: (800) 797-1717.

Prevention

You can help avoid problems if you:

- Keep your blood pressure at a healthy level
- Manage diabetes (if you have it)
- Drink lots of fluids
- Take your meds
- Follow up with your doctor for routine blood tests

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