

Six eating habits for healthy kidneys

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When it comes to health advice, our hearts are often in the spotlight. However, as equally vital organs, our kidneys really shouldn't be relegated to the shadows. Worldwide, chronic kidney disease (CKD) is on the rise - one in 10 people globally are affected, and that's every bit as serious as cardiac disease.



Our kidneys work very hard for our bodies, and the downside of their dogged efficiency is that by the time we are bothered enough by the symptoms of CKD, the damage has been done. In the late stages of CKD, only ongoing dialysis or surgical transplant may help prolong life - treatments that are not available to many South Africans. This is why health professionals drawing attention to Kidney Awareness Week from 2 to 6 September, advocate for regular screening of kidney function, especially if you fall into the high risk categories.

Interestingly, similar to heart health, obesity, diabetes and hypertension put us at risk for CKD as well. The view of ADSA (the Association for Dietetics in South Africa) is that with the high prevalence of obesity, diabetes and hypertension in the country, it stands to reason that we need to become a nation aware of, and caring about our kidneys.

People who are overweight or obese are up to seven times more likely to develop end-stage renal disease compared to those of normal weight. A family history of CKD or renal failure is also a red flag indicating that you need to actively focus on the health of your kidneys. However, the prime culprit in the majority of CKD cases in South Africa (64%) is undetected or uncontrolled hypertension, which is abnormally high blood pressure. So a basic step in ensuring kidney health is regular blood pressure testing and adherence to treatment and lifestyle changes in order to keep your blood pressure in check.

Every day, our valiant kidneys help us dispose of the excess salt and water that we consume. In the process, they also happen to eliminate toxins that would otherwise build up and take down the living system that is our body. Our kidneys also play an important role in controlling our blood acidity and blood pressure levels. For those who are obese, the kidneys have to work harder, filtering more blood than normal to cope with the demands of the greater body weight. This increased workload can damage the kidneys and raise the risk of developing CKD in the long term. "When kidneys do fail, the body is literally overwhelmed by excess water, salt and toxins, which defeat every other organ and body system," says ADSA spokesperson, Registered Dietitian, Abby Courtenay. "The job of the kidneys may not be glamorous or poetic, like the heart, but it is every bit as important."

The good news in all of this is that there is a lot we can do day to day to promote the health of our kidneys. Courtenay adds: “If you have been screened and diagnosed in the earlier stages of CKD, or need to implement measures because you suffer from obesity, diabetes or hypertension, you can make a significant positive difference just with your daily diet.”

“Nutritional strategies to deal with CKD, as well as its risk factors are well researched and documented,” says Registered Dietitian, Cecile Verseput. “What’s important to note is that in the most up-to-date professional interpretation of the research available, the focus has turned from considering single nutrients to looking more holistically at an overall healthful dietary pattern, particularly rich in plant-based foods.” Cecile points out that recent SA consumer statistics show that fresh fruit and veg, as well as healthy sources of vegetable protein, are low shopping priorities in the country.

Here are her six top tips for boosting kidney health:

1. **Go green – and red, yellow, orange, purple and blue!** Boosting the fresh fruit and veg in your diet is one of the best ways to protect your kidneys. There are so many ways to make vegetables and salads a delicious part of your family’s eating.
2. **Get real** – Drop the high-salt, trans-fat takeaways and convenience foods like hot cakes. Cultivate a real interest and enjoyment in cooking from scratch with fresh, healthy ingredients. It’s so much more delicious, and good for your kidneys.
3. **Be choosy about fats** – They are not equal. Go for extra virgin olive oil and avocado oil rather than hard fats to protect the blood vessels in your kidneys.
4. **Go nuts** – Boost your intake of nuts and legumes. They are delicious, and provide healthy fats and fibre.
5. **Forget the convenient fads** – Let go of the sugar-sweetened drinks and treats, fast foods, processed and red meat.
6. **Embrace plant protein power** – Open up to the wide range of legumes, grains and nuts that are readily available and make them part of your daily eating. Swap red meat with legumes or alternatively with fish or poultry.

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