

What is Kidney Cancer

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Kidney cancer begins when healthy cells in one or both kidneys change and grow uncontrollably, forming a tumor. There are several types of kidney cancer, but renal cell carcinoma is the most common. There are also several types of kidney cancer cells. The most common are clear cells. Knowing which type of cell makes up a kidney tumor helps doctors plan treatment.

What is the function of the kidneys?

The kidneys are reddish-brown, bean-shaped organs located above the waist on either side of the spine. They filter blood and remove impurities, excess minerals and salts, and extra water to produce urine. These organs also produce hormones that help control blood pressure, red blood cell production, and other functions. Because each kidney works independently, one kidney can be removed while preserving the function of the other.

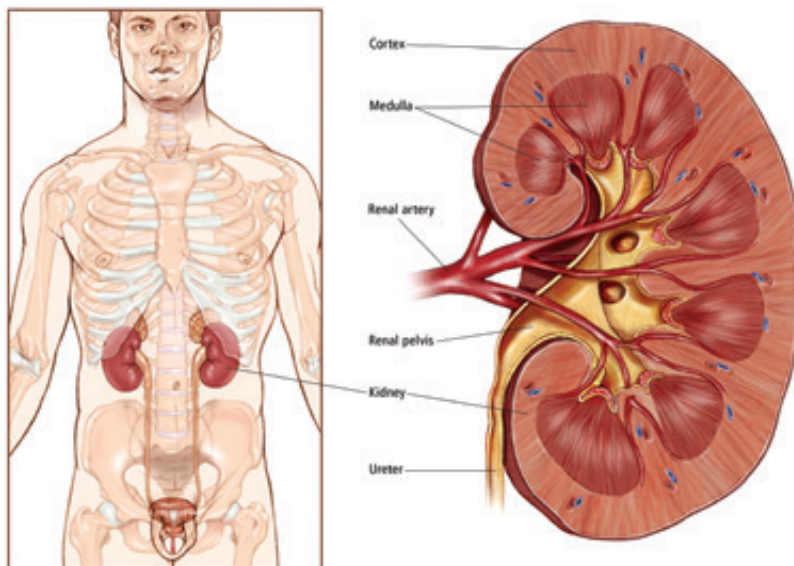


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What does stage mean?

The stage is a way of describing where the cancer is located, if or where it has spread, and whether it is affecting other parts of the body. There are five stages for kidney cancer: stage 0 (zero, which is rare) and stages I through IV (one through four). Descriptions and illustrations of these stages are available at www.cancer.net/kidney.

How is kidney cancer treated?

The treatment of kidney cancer depends on the type and stage of the cancer, whether the cancer has spread, and the person's overall health. Kidney cancer is most often treated with surgery, targeted therapy, and/or immunotherapy. In some situations, especially when the tumor is small and the person has other medical conditions, the doctor may recommend active surveillance. During active surveillance, the tumor is closely monitored and active treatment only starts if the disease shows signs of getting worse. If the cancer has not spread beyond the kidneys, surgery to remove the tumor, part or all of the kidney, and possibly nearby tissue and lymph nodes, may be the only necessary treatment. Radiation therapy and chemotherapy are occasionally used. People with kidney cancer that has spread to other parts of the body often receive several treatments one after another. When making treatment decisions, people may also consider a clinical trial; talk with your doctor about all treatment options. The side effects of kidney cancer treatment can often be prevented or managed with the help of your health care team. This is called palliative care and is an important part of the overall treatment plan.

How can I cope with kidney cancer?

Absorbing the news of a cancer diagnosis and communicating with your health care team are key parts of the coping process. Seeking support, organizing your health information, making sure all of your questions are answered, and participating in the decision-making process are other steps. Talk with your health care team about any concerns. Understanding your emotions and those of people close to you can be helpful in managing the diagnosis, treatment, and healing process.

Questions to ask the doctor

Regular communication is important in making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking the following questions of your health care team:

- What type of kidney cancer do I have? What type of cell is involved?
- Can you explain my pathology report (laboratory test results) to me?
- What stage is the kidney cancer? What does this mean?
- Would you explain my treatment options?
- What clinical trials are open to me? Where are they located, and how can I find out more about them?
- What treatment plan do you recommend? Why?
- What is the goal of each treatment? Is it to eliminate the cancer, help me feel better, or both?
- Who will be part of my treatment team, and what does each member do?
- How will this treatment affect my daily life? Will I be able to work, exercise, and perform my usual activities?
- Will this treatment affect my ability to become pregnant or have children?
- What long-term side effects may be associated with my cancer treatment?
- If I'm worried about managing the costs related to my cancer care, who can help me with these concerns?
- Where can I find emotional support for me and my family?
- Whom should I call for questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Additional questions to ask the doctor can be found at www.cancer.net/kidney.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Biopsy:

Removal of a tissue sample that is then examined under a microscope to check for cancer cells

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Immunotherapy:

Treatment that uses the immune system to fight cancer

Lymph node:

A tiny, bean-shaped organ that fights infection

Metastasis:

The spread of cancer from where it began to another part of the body

Nephrectomy:

Partial or total removal of a kidney

Oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating cancer

Prognosis:

Chance of recovery

Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

Targeted therapy:

Treatment that targets specific genes or proteins that contribute to cancer growth

Tumor:

An abnormal growth of body tissue

Urologic oncologist:

A doctor who specializes in treating cancers of the urinary tract

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