

# WORKING WITH CHRONIC KIDNEY DISEASE



National  
Kidney  
Foundation™

[www.kidney.org](http://www.kidney.org)

Many people with chronic kidney disease (CKD) or kidney failure work full time or part time. Some go to school, or take care of their homes and families. Others do volunteer work, have hobbies or have regular exercise routines. If you have kidney disease or kidney failure, you may have questions about working. This brochure will answer many of your questions.

### **I was working before my kidneys failed. Will I be able to go back to work?**

Many people who start dialysis or have a transplant want to go back to work quickly. They may feel work will help their lives get back to normal. Some people take a little time off to start dialysis. Others take a longer time to get used to dialysis or to recover from transplant surgery. Talk to your doctor about going back to work.

### **I am not working now. Are there ways to help me find a job?**

Yes. There are many services for people looking for jobs. Some are private companies. Others are government agencies. They can help you decide what kind of job you want and what you are qualified to do. They can help you write a resume and get

ready for interviews. Remember that some private companies will expect payment for their services. Some popular job-hunting resources are:

- [Monster.com](https://www.monster.com)
- [Careerbuilder.com](https://www.careerbuilder.com)
- [Craigslist.com](https://www.craigslist.com)
- [Indeed.com](https://www.indeed.com)
- [SimplyHired.com](https://www.simplyhired.com)
- [Dice.com](https://www.dice.com)
- [Glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com)
- the Help Wanted section of local newspapers
- employment and temporary agencies
- state client assistance programs
- Job Corps
- state or local employment agencies

Your social worker can help you. Some government agencies may even help pay for training. If you find work through a state or federal vocational rehabilitation agency, your employer may be able to get a tax credit for hiring you.

If you are entering the job market for the first time, you may need or want some more education. Most schools have guidance counselors and employment counselors. These people can help you decide what your needs are, based on the work you want to do.

### **How can I get ready for job hunting?**

Start by writing a résumé. This is a record of your education and your work history. You may want to do your résumé on a computer so you can email it and post it to job websites.

A résumé includes:

- your name, address, email address, and telephone number(s)
- a summary of your work experience (both paid and volunteer)
- your educational history
- any special skills you have that may help you qualify for a job
- the names of two or three references—people you know who would recommend you for a job
- any special interests, hobbies, or organizations you participate in, especially if they reflect your career goals or show that you are an active member of your community

## **What happens at a job interview?**

During a job interview, you will meet with someone from the company, often from the company's human resources department. They will tell you about the company and describe the job. This is your chance to talk to them about your skills. You should talk about the things that you do well. Don't be afraid to talk about skills you learned while doing volunteer work. Don't be afraid to ask questions about the company and the position. You will make a good impression if you show you are interested in the company and want to learn about it.

## **Should I tell the company about my illness and treatment?**

If you think that your illness and treatment will not interfere with your ability to do the job, you do not need to mention it during an interview.

## **What if I am working when I begin treatment?**

Some people continue to work full time when they begin treatment. Others switch to a part-time or flexible schedule. Some people ask for less physically demanding jobs.

You may need to work different hours to go to hemodialysis. Or you may need a clean, private area where you can do peritoneal dialysis.

You should feel free to talk to your employer about job changes that might make it easier for you to work. Remember, your employer probably won't know what changes you might need if you don't ask for them.

Your employer may not know much about kidney disease or how it may affect your abilities. There might be concerns about how much work you can do and how much time off you will need. There could also be concerns about how much your health benefits will cost the company. You may want to ask your doctor or another member of your healthcare team to talk with your employer about these. A little information about your illness, abilities, and limitations can do a lot to ease an employer's concerns. Here are a few of the topics you and your employer may want to discuss:

- changing your work schedule to allow for dialysis and healthcare visits
- making up time taken off for medical reasons

- physical limitations, if any
- what to do in case of an emergency

Employers may not know about tax credits they can get for making changes to the workplace.

### **Are there laws to protect me against job discrimination?**

The Civil Rights Act, the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act all protect you from job discrimination. Examples of discrimination include being fired or being turned down for a job or a promotion because of an illness or condition that does not affect your ability to do your job. The Department of Labor handles complaints filed under the Rehabilitation Act.

If you work for a company with 15 or more employees, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires your employer to make any “reasonable accommodations” that you might need in order to work. Examples include:

- making parking lots, bathrooms, and work areas handicapped accessible
- having flexible work schedules

- reassigning you to a less strenuous job if you request one and one is available
- assigning any of your non-essential tasks to other employees, at your request

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission handles complaints under the ADA.

If you work at least 20 weeks of the year for an employer with 50 or more employees, you may qualify for the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). The FMLA allows for 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave for medical reasons.

If you had group health insurance coverage before the leave, it will continue under the same terms or conditions. Your employer can ask for medical certification stating that you have a serious illness, but cannot punish you for taking leave to have surgery or begin treatment. Your spouse, children, or parents may also be eligible for FMLA leave if you need them to provide you with care or transportation. The Department of Labor handles complaints under the FMLA.



## **Where can I get help if I think I was discriminated against because of my kidney disease or kidney failure?**

If you think you have a grievance with your employer, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) suggests that you first go through channels the company has set up. Union members should take their complaints to their locals.

Most towns and cities have departments that help if there is discrimination in the workplace. The name of the department depends on where you live. It may be called the Department of Human Services, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Office for People with Disabilities, or something similar.

On the state or federal level, you can contact the Human Rights Commission, the Department of Labor, or the EEOC. Your social worker may also be able to help you.

## **Will I have to take a physical exam?**

The ADA states that your employer may not ask you to take a physical exam until after a job offer has been made and only if all the applicants for that job are required to take a physical

exam. If the job offer is taken back after you have the exam, the company must show that you cannot perform the essential functions of the job. You can be asked to take a drug test.



### **Am I entitled to company health insurance?**

If the company offers health insurance to all of its employees who work the same number of hours that you work, you must be offered the same coverage. Read the policy carefully to see if it covers treatment for kidney disease. If the policy says there is a waiting period for employees with existing health conditions, there could be a delay in your coverage.

If you had health insurance less than 63 days before getting new coverage, you may have met all or part of the waiting period. Ask your old insurance company to give you a Certificate of Credible Coverage and give it to

your new health plan's administrator. Your state insurance commissioner's office can tell you more about the laws covering group health insurance companies.

### TIP

If you are undergoing treatment for kidney failure, you should know that many of the costs for dialysis and kidney transplant are covered by the federal government through Medicare. Medicare is not just for people who are 65 and older. The program also helps Americans and legal residents of all ages who need dialysis or a kidney transplant and qualify for coverage.

## What kinds of disability benefits can I get if I can't work?

Most people need financial help if they can't work. Your social worker can give you information about financial programs, what the qualifications are, and how to apply. The Federal government runs two of the best-known programs. Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) is a program of the Social Security Administration. It pays a monthly cash benefit to people who are not able to work for a year or more because of a disability. The amount you get depends on the

length of time you worked before your disability and the amount of tax taken out of your earnings during that time.

Your family's current income level doesn't affect the amount that you get. There is a 3–5 month review period for applications. If you stopped working before you applied, you may qualify for back benefits. You can apply for SSDI online at: [www.ssa.gov/applyfordisability/](http://www.ssa.gov/applyfordisability/)

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is also paid by the Social Security Administration. Benefits are calculated based on the person's financial needs, not the amount of tax that they paid. SSI pays its benefits on a monthly basis. This amount may be supplemented by state or local benefits. You must file an application with Social Security to be considered.

### **Are there any government programs that help people with kidney disease or kidney failure find work?**

Social Security has many programs to help you find work. If you receive either SSDI or SSI, ask your social worker or Social Security representative for information about work incentive programs to help you

ease back into work. One of them is the *Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency* program. Under this program Social Security gives you a ticket that you can bring to a service provider approved by Social Security. It can be used to get additional education, job training, or job placement services.

More information about the Ticket To Work and Self-Sufficiency program can be found at: **[www.choosework.net](http://www.choosework.net)**

You may qualify to get services from your state's vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency. They will look at your work history, skills and interests.

They help you decide what type of assistance you need. Your counselor can help you get more education or job training, and can help you find a job or keep your present job. The process of applying for and getting benefits can take a few months.

Be patient but persistent. Counselors have heavy workloads, but they want to help.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers vocational rehabilitation services to qualified veterans.

Information can be found at your state's VA office or at: **[www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/index.htm](http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/index.htm)**

Some community service agencies have job training programs. Ask your social worker if these programs are available in your area.

### **Why look for work if I can get disability benefits?**

Getting a job can be rewarding. Having a job helps people feel good. It allows you to earn money to pay your bills and do the things you enjoy. It can help you get health insurance. It can help you feel more useful. It may also help you to meet new people.

### **Am I ready to work?**

Obviously your health has to be your top priority. Before you think about finding or returning to a job, you have to decide if you are physically and mentally ready to work. The process of getting yourself ready to begin working again is often called rehabilitation. For people with kidney disease or kidney failure, rehabilitation involves:

- returning to a healthier physical state
- maintaining a positive outlook
- enjoying relationships with family and friends
- feeling more productive

Volunteering may be another way to feel good about yourself while gaining skills that could help you get a paying job in the future.



### **How can I build my strength and endurance?**

You can learn how to improve your physical condition. This will help you do things that are important to you. Remember to follow your doctor's advice for treatment, diet, and medications.

Most people with kidney disease or kidney failure have anemia—a low red blood cell count—which causes muscle weakness and fatigue. A medication called an erythropoiesis-stimulating agent (ESA) is used to treat anemia. Ask your doctor about ESA therapy.

Stay active. Doing chores, exercising, or enjoying your hobbies will keep your body in motion; this can give you more energy. It also helps your muscles.

Talk to your doctor about an exercise program that is right for you (see the National Kidney Foundation brochure *Staying Fit with Kidney Disease*).

Follow a healthy diet. Talk to your dietitian about foods that can help. (See the National Kidney Foundation brochures *Nutrition and Hemodialysis*, *Nutrition and Peritoneal Dialysis*, and *Nutrition and Transplantation*.)

### **What else can I do to cope?**

At first, changes in your health may make it hard to think about the future. You may feel angry, sad, or even guilty. These are normal feelings and are part of the adjustment process. Sometimes these bad thoughts or feelings can drain your energy and make it hard to enjoy life. Many people find that staying busy helps.

When bad thoughts or feelings like sadness, anger or guilt last longer than a couple of weeks, they can lead to depression. Talk with your social worker or your doctor about how to get help if you're feeling overly sad, sleeping or eating too much, being



unable to sleep or eat, feeling like you want to give up or harm yourself, or feeling isolated and alone. You may be experiencing depression.

Depression can be treated with counseling and medication.

Remember—you have choices. Many people say they feel better and more in control of their lives when they learn more about kidney disease and how to take care of themselves.

### **What else should I know?**

You might need help to go back to a full, productive life after being diagnosed. Your family, friends, employers, and healthcare staff can help. But the most important person in the rehabilitation plan is YOU. It will take hard work to cope with the changes caused by your illness. But the results can be worth the effort. If you take charge of your rehabilitation, and ask others for help when you need it, you are likely to be successful.

The National Kidney Foundation can provide information. Call the NKF Cares Patient Help Line toll-free at **855.NKF.CARES** (855.653.2273) or email **[nkfcare@kidney.org](mailto:nkfcare@kidney.org)**

## Other Resources

The Social Security work website is:  
**[www.socialsecurity.gov/work](http://www.socialsecurity.gov/work)**

You can download a copy of the *Life Options* employment book at:  
**[www.lifeoptions.org/catalog/pdfs/booklets/employment.pdf](http://www.lifeoptions.org/catalog/pdfs/booklets/employment.pdf)**

You might also be interested in these other publications from the National Kidney Foundation:

*Coping Effectively: A Guide for Patients and Their Families*

*Sexuality and Chronic Kidney Disease*

*Staying Fit with Kidney Disease*

To obtain copies of these publications, or information about other National Kidney Foundation resources, call the NKF Cares Patient Help Line toll-free at **855.NKF.CARES** (855.653.2273) or email **[nkfcares@kidney.org](mailto:nkfcares@kidney.org)**

Learn more at **[www.kidney.org](http://www.kidney.org)**



The **National Kidney Foundation** is the leading organization in the U.S. dedicated to the awareness, prevention, and treatment of kidney disease for hundreds of thousands of healthcare professionals, millions of patients and their families, and tens of millions of Americans at risk.

Help fight kidney disease.

Learn more at **[www.kidney.org](http://www.kidney.org)**



National  
Kidney  
Foundation™

30 East 33rd Street  
New York, NY 10016  
800.622.9010



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