



NATIONAL KIDNEY
FOUNDATION®

Vaccines & Kidney Disease: A Guide For Care Partners



Kidney disease can make it harder for the body to fight infections

Your immune system helps protect your body from germs, like viruses and bacteria. Kidney disease can weaken the immune system. This means people with kidney disease or those on dialysis may get sicker from infections. People with a kidney transplant take medicines that lower the immune system so the body does not reject the new kidney. These medicines can also raise the risk of infections and can make vaccines work less well, which is why the schedule may differ from what other family members receive.



Vaccination is one of the safest and most effective ways to protect your loved one from serious illness

Vaccines help protect people from certain diseases. They teach the body how to fight germs before a real infection happens. Keeping your loved one up to date on vaccines can lower their risk of serious illness and hospitalization from infectious diseases such as the flu and COVID-19.



Care partners help protect loved ones with kidney disease

Here are ways you can help:

- **Talk with the healthcare team:** Ask the healthcare team any questions about vaccines. They can tell you which vaccines your loved one may need. Vaccines that are recommended for people with kidney disease can include the flu, COVID-19, pneumococcal disease, hepatitis B, RSV, and shingles. Ask which ones are due now and which need a follow-up dose.
- **Keep a record:** Write down which vaccines your loved one has received. Bring this list to medical visits. You can also ask how to access vaccination records online.
- **Vaccinate the household:** People who live with or closely care for someone with kidney disease should stay up to date on vaccines. This helps protect everyone at home. If someone in the household receives a live vaccine, ask the healthcare team whether any precautions are needed.



Talk and listen to your loved one about vaccines

- Talking about health choices can be hard. Try to listen, show understanding, and share clear information.
- Ask what questions or worries they have about vaccines.
- Let them know that vaccines are safe and effective. Vaccines do not cause the illness they are meant to prevent.
- Explain that vaccines do not harm the kidneys. Some infections, such as the flu and COVID-19, can harm the kidneys.
- Remind them that getting vaccinated may feel like one more task, but it can help keep them from getting very sick.
- Explain that people with kidney disease have a higher risk of serious illness because their immune system may not work as well.
- Write down their questions and concerns. Bring them to the next medical visit and talk about them with the healthcare team.
- Talking to a child about vaccines and kidney disease can feel hard, but simple, reassuring explanations can help. Children can do better when they understand why something is happening without being overwhelmed with too many scary medical words.

Also keep in mind that there are some vaccines that should be avoided by people with a kidney transplant. For example if a person has kidney transplant and are on immunosuppressant medications, avoid “live” vaccines (such as the nasal spray flu vaccine, MMR, or chickenpox vaccines). Always confirm their status with the healthcare team.



Questions to ask the healthcare team

Here are some questions you can ask:

- My loved one has some questions and concerns about vaccines. Can we discuss them?
- Which vaccines should my loved one get because of kidney disease?
- Are any other vaccines needed because of their health conditions or risks?
- Are there any vaccines to avoid?
- Where can we find reliable information about vaccines?
- Which vaccines should I and others in the household get to help protect my loved one?
- If a transplant is being considered, which vaccines should be given before surgery?



For more information, contact the National Kidney Foundation

Toll-free help line: **855.NKF.CARES** or email: **nkfcares@kidney.org**