Many people with chronic kidney disease (CKD) or kidney failure work full-time or part-time, 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 CKD or kidney failure, you may have questions about finding, keeping or changing jobs. This brochure was designed to answer many of your questions.

I was working before I got kidney disease. Will I be able to go back to work?

Many people who start dialysis or have a transplant want to return to work quickly because work helps them feel that their lives have gotten back to normal. Some people take a little time off to start dialysis, while others take a longer leave of absence to get used to dialysis or to recover from surgery. You should talk to your doctor about when you will be able to return to work.

I am not working now. Are there resources to help me find a job?

Yes. There are many services available for job seekers. Some of these services are private companies, others are government agencies. They can help you decide what kind of job you would like and what you are qualified to
do. They can also help you write a resume and prepare for interviews. Remember that private companies will expect payment for their services. The following are some popular job-hunting resources:

- Monster.com
- Careerbuilder.com
- Hotjobs.com
- USAJOBS.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 locate these resources. Many National Kidney Foundation affiliates have listings of local employment agencies. Some government agencies may even help pay for training. Furthermore, if you find work through a state or federal vocational rehabilitation agency, your employer may be eligible to receive a tax credit for employing you.

If you are entering the job market for the first time you may find out that you need or want some more education. Most schools have guidance counselors and employment counselors who can help you decide what your needs are, based on the career that you want to pursue.
How can I prepare for job hunting?

Start by writing a résumé. This is a record of your education and your work history. It 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

What should I expect at a job interview?

During a job interview, you will meet with an employee of the company, often from the company’s Human Resources department. They will tell you about the company and describe the job, especially the job’s responsibilities. This is your chance to talk to them about the skills you possess that qualify you for the job. You should talk about the things that you do well. Do not 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 that you’re applying for. You will leave a posi-
tive impression with potential employers if you show them that you are interested in the company and want to learn about it.

**Should I tell potential employers about my illness and treatment?**

If you do not think that your illness and treatment will interfere with your ability to do the job that you are applying for, you do not need to mention it during an interview. Many people with CKD suggest that you only bring up your illness when you receive a job offer.

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

People who are working when they are diagnosed with CKD face a particular set of challenges. 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 certain hours in order to go to dialysis or you may need a clean, private area in which to do your peritoneal dialysis exchanges. You should feel free to talk to your employer about changes to your job 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.

Do not expect your employer to know much about kidney disease or how it may affect your ability to work. They might have concerns about how much work you can do and how much time off you will need. They may also
have concerns about how much your health benefits will cost the company. You may want to ask your doctor or another member of your health care team to speak with your employer about some of these issues. 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:

- altering your work schedule to accommodate dialysis and doctor visits
- making up time taken off for medical reasons
- your physical limitations, if any
- what to do in case of an emergency.

Employers may not know about tax credits they can receive for making changes to the workplace. You may want to give your employer a copy of the National Kidney Foundation’s brochure About Chronic Kidney Disease: A Guide for Patients and their Families. You can also refer them to the National Kidney Foundation’s Web site: www.kidney.org

**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; and 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 you to keep your group health insurance, but you may have to pay the full premium. 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 and you cannot be forced to return to light duty before your leave is over. In most cases your employer must provide you with identical responsibilities to those you had prior to your leave. 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 believe I have been discriminated against because of my kidney disease?

If you feel that you have a grievance with your employer, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) suggests that you first pursue it through the company’s established channels. Union members should take their complaints to their locals. Most towns and cities have departments that help people who have encountered discrimination in the workplace. The name of the department will vary depending 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. You can find the phone numbers for these agencies in the telephone book’s blue pages. Your social worker or your National Kidney Foundation affiliate 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 rescinded after you have taken the exam, the company must show that you cannot perform the essential functions of the job. It should be noted, however, that 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, than you must be offered the same coverage. Read the policy carefully to see if it covers treatment for kidney disease. If the policy requires a waiting period for employees with existing health conditions, there could be a delay in your coverage. However, if you had health insurance less than 63 days prior to receiving new coverage, you may have met all or part of the waiting period. Ask your old health plan to provide you with a Certificate of Credible Coverage that you can give to your new health plan’s administrator. Your state’s insurance commissioner’s office can tell you more about the laws that apply to group health insurance companies.

What kinds of disability benefits can I receive if I can’t work?

Unless you have some other source of income, you will probably need financial help if you can’t work. Your social worker can give you information about what programs are available, what the qualifications are and how to apply for them. The Federal government runs two of the best-known programs. The Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) is a program operated by the
Social Security Administration. It pays a monthly cash benefit to people who are unable to work for a year or more because of a disability. The amount you receive is determined by the length of time you worked prior to your disability and the amount of tax deducted from your earnings during that time. Your family’s current income level does not affect the amount that you are paid. There is a 3-5 month review period for applications; however, if you stopped working before you applied, you may qualify for back benefits. You can apply for SSDI online at: www.socialsecurity.gov/applyfordisability/

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is also paid by the Social Security Administration. Benefits are calculated based on the recipient’s financial needs, not the amount of tax that they’ve paid. SSI pays its benefits out on a monthly basis and may be supplemented by state or local benefits. You must file an application with Social Security in order to be considered. At this time applications for SSI cannot be filed online.

Are there any government programs that help people with kidney disease find work?

Social Security has many programs designed 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 that will allow you to ease back into work. One of the things they will tell you about is the Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency program. Under this program Social Security provides you with a ticket that
you can bring to a state or federal employment agency, where it can be used to obtain additional education, job training, or job placement services. This is what the voucher looks like:

More information about the Ticket To Work program can be found at: www.yourtickettowork.com/ttw_ticket

You may qualify to receive services from your state’s vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency. They will evaluate your work history, skills and interests and help you decide what type of assistance you need. Your counselor can help you get additional education or job training and can help you find or keep a job. The process of applying for and receiving benefits can take several months, so be patient but persistent. Counselors have heavy workloads, but they want to help motivated clients.

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/emp_resources.htm
Community service agencies, including some National Kidney Foundation affiliates, provide job training programs. Talk to your social worker or your local National Kidney Foundation affiliate about whether these programs are available in your area.

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

Getting a job can be a rewarding experience. Not only does it allow you to earn the money you need to pay your bills and to do the things you enjoy, it can help you get health insurance as well. Holding down a job helps many people feel better about themselves. It can help you feel more productive and allows you to get out and socialize. Volunteering may be another way to feel good about yourself while gaining skills that could help you get a paid job in the future.

**Am I ready to work?**

Obviously your health has got to be your top priority. Before you think about finding or returning to a job, you have to assess whether you are physically and mentally ready to work. The process of preparing yourself to begin working again is often referred to as rehabilitation. For people with CKD, rehabilitation involves:

- returning to a healthier physical state
- maintaining a positive outlook
- enjoying relationships with family and friends
- feeling productive.
How can I build my strength and endurance?

With help from your family, friends and health care team, you can learn how to improve your physical condition. This will allow you to take part in the activities you enjoy and complete the tasks that you set for yourself. Remember to always follow your doctor’s advice for treatment, diet and medications.

Most people with kidney failure have anemia—a low blood count—which leads to muscle weakness and fatigue. A medication called erythropoietin (EPO) is used to treat anemia. Ask your doctor if you are a candidate for EPO treatment (see the National Kidney Foundation brochure What You Need to Know About Anemia and Chronic Kidney Disease). Stay active. Whether you’re doing chores, exercising, or enjoying your hobbies, keeping your body in motion can increase your energy level and helps keep your muscles in better condition. Talk to your doctor about establishing an exercise program that is right for you (see the National Kidney Foundation brochure Staying Fit with Kidney Disease).

Speak with your dietitian about what foods you can eat to help keep your muscles healthy. (See National Kidney Foundation brochures Nutrition and Hemodialysis, Nutrition and Peritoneal Dialysis and Nutrition and Transplantation.)
What else can I do to cope with my illness?

Right now the changes in your health may make it hard for you to think about the future. You may feel angry, sad or even guilty. These are normal feelings and are part of the adjustment process, but remember that negative thoughts can drain you of your energy and make it hard for you to enjoy life. Many people find that staying busy keeps them from focusing too much on negative thoughts. Negative thoughts can lead to depression if they last longer than a couple of weeks. Talk with your social worker or your doctor about how to get help if you’re feeling depressed. Depression can be treated with counseling and medication. Be aware that you have choices. Many people say they began to feel better and more in control of their lives as they learned more about kidney disease and how to take care of themselves.

Your local National Kidney Foundation affiliate can also provide information. Check the white pages of your telephone directory or call 800.622.9010 for the number of the NKF affiliate nearest you. (See the National Kidney Foundation brochure Coping Effectively: A Guide for Patients and Their Families.) You can also visit the NKF’s Web site, www.kidney.org for more information.
What else should I know?

You might need help in order to return to a full, productive life after kidney failure. Your family, friends, employers and health care staff can help you, but the most important person in the rehabilitation plan is YOU, the person with kidney disease. It will take hard work and determination for you 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 should be able to meet many of your rehabilitation goals.

Other Resources

Social Security’s work site is: www.socialsecurity.gov/work

You can download a copy of the Life Options employment book at: 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, contact your local National Kidney Foundation affiliate, or call the national toll-free number 800.622.9010.
More than 20 million Americans—one in nine adults—have chronic kidney disease, and most don’t even know it. More than 20 million others are at increased risk. The National Kidney Foundation, a major voluntary health organization, seeks to prevent kidney and urinary tract diseases, improve the health and well-being of individuals and families affected by these diseases, and increase the availability of all organs for transplantation. Through its 47 affiliates nationwide, the foundation conducts programs in research, professional education, patient and community services, public education and organ donation. The work of the National Kidney Foundation is funded by public donations.

This arrow illustrates the potential scope of content for KLS resources. Light shaded boxes indicate the scope of content targeted in this resource.

GFR = Glomerular Filtration Rate; T = Kidney Transplant; D = Dialysis