



## Patient information: Planning for a kidney transplant (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

**What is a kidney transplant?** — A kidney transplant is a surgery to insert a new, healthy kidney into a person whose kidneys are diseased. Normally, the kidneys filter the blood and remove waste and excess salt and water ([figure 1](#)). When people have kidney failure, also called “end-stage renal disease,” their kidneys stop working.

During a kidney transplant, a doctor puts a healthy kidney in a person’s body ([figure 2](#)). Then the new kidney can do the job of the diseased kidneys. (People need only 1 kidney to live.)

**Where can a new kidney come from?** — A new kidney can come from a:

- Living donor – A living donor is usually a family member or friend. He or she can be related to you, but doesn’t need to be. A living donor can also be someone you don’t know, but this is not as common.
- Dead donor

Getting a new kidney from a living donor is almost always better than getting a kidney from a dead donor. That’s because:

- A kidney from a living donor is usually healthier and lasts longer.
- You don’t have to wait as long for a new kidney. You can get a new kidney before your kidneys stop working completely.
- Your body is more likely to react better to a kidney from a living donor.

**When should I plan for a kidney transplant?** — You should start planning while your kidneys still work and before your kidney disease gets severe. You will need time to:

- Find a living donor (if you want a living donor)
- Meet with doctors and have the exams and tests you need before surgery
- Get information and make plans – You should find out if your health insurance will pay for the transplant. You might need to make plans for when you are in the hospital and away from your job or family.

**How do I plan for a kidney transplant?** — First, your doctor will send you to a transplant center. At the transplant center, you will meet with different doctors and have exams and tests.

Not everyone who wants a kidney transplant can get one. People usually can’t have a kidney transplant if they:

- Have severe heart disease or another serious long-term illnesses
- Have cancer or recently had cancer

- Are too overweight
- Can't or won't take medicines every day after surgery
- Drink too much alcohol or use drugs

The person who wants to donate a kidney also needs to go to a transplant center. He or she needs to meet with doctors and have exams and tests. To donate a kidney, a person needs to be healthy and meet certain conditions. His or her blood also has to match the blood of the person getting the kidney. The person getting the kidney is called the “recipient.”

It's important to know that the results of the donor's exams and tests are kept secret. Plus, he or she can change his or her mind about donating at any time.

**What if I don't have a living donor or my living donor isn't a good match?** — If you don't have a living donor or your donor isn't a good match, you have a few options.

You can be put on a list to get a kidney from a dead donor. An organization called “UNOS” keeps track of this list. When a new kidney is available, UNOS decides who is next on the list to get it.

One downside to being on this list is that you need to have very severe kidney disease to get to the top of the list. While you are waiting for your kidney transplant, you will probably need a treatment called “dialysis.” People who need to have dialysis before a kidney transplant usually don't live as long as people who don't need to have dialysis before a transplant.

If you have a living donor, but he or she isn't a good match for you, you can look for an “exchange program.” One type of exchange program is called a “paired exchange.” In a paired exchange, you and your donor find another donor and recipient who don't match each other, but do match with you. Then your donor can give a kidney to the other recipient, and the other donor can give a kidney to you.

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**Literature review current through:** Sep 2012. | **This topic last updated:** Jul 27, 2011.

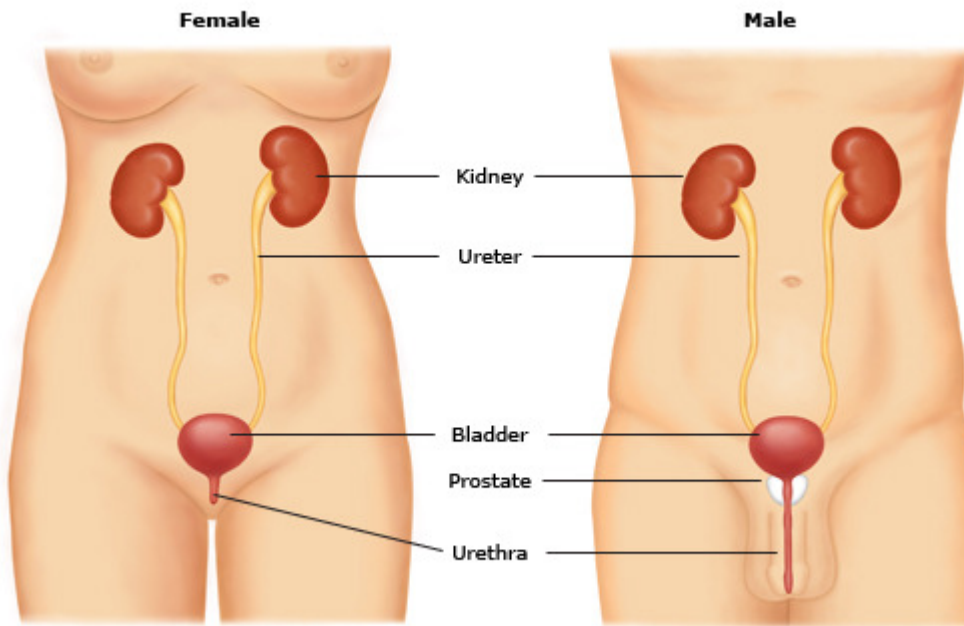
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## GRAPHICS

### Anatomy of the urinary tract

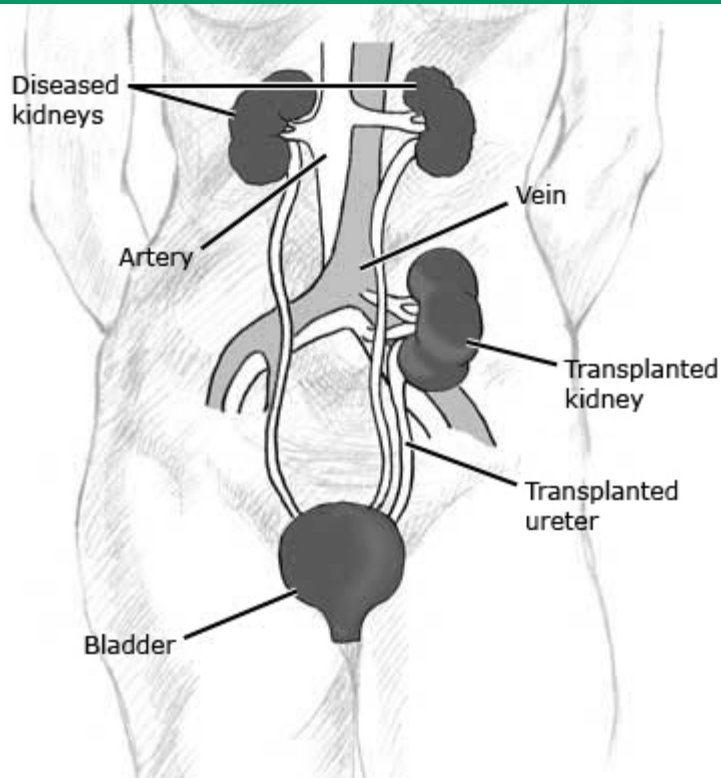
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Urine is made by the kidneys. It passes from the kidneys into the bladder through two tubes called the ureters. Then it leaves the bladder through another tube, called the urethra.

## Kidney transplant

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This drawing shows a person who has had a kidney transplant. The new kidney is put in the lower part of the belly. Its ureter (the tube that carries urine from the kidney to the bladder) is connected to the person's bladder. In many cases, the diseased kidneys are left in place. *Reproduced from: Treatment Methods for Kidney Failure: Transplantation. National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). Available at: <http://kidney.niddk.nih.gov/kudiseases/pubs/transplant>.*

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