

Conservative  
treatment:



Choosing not  
to start dialysis



*The foundation of kidney care.*

# Conservative treatment:

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## Choosing not to start dialysis

You have the right to make your own choices about how you are treated for kidney failure. That means you can choose not to start dialysis. It is important for you to have all the information you need to make this decision.

Once your kidneys have reached the point where you would normally need dialysis, it is important to know that if you choose not to start, your health will continue to fail and you will eventually die. This pamphlet addresses concerns you or your family may have. It will help you get ready to talk about this choice with your healthcare team.

### ■ What is conservative treatment?

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If you choose not to start dialysis, you are choosing what is known as conservative treatment. Excellent medical care is still available if you choose this type of treatment. Conservative treatment means using medications and diet to maximize your comfort, and help with any symptoms you may have. Machines such as respirators and dialysis machines will not be used.

## ■ Why would I choose not to start dialysis?

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Often people have many other health complications and dialysis may not help treat these other problems. Dialysis is a treatment meant to improve your life, not cause further harm and suffering. This is a personal decision based on the quality of life you wish to have.

It is important for you to make this choice for the right reasons. Your healthcare team can help you rule out any factors like depression, stress or other medical issues that could be changed to improve your quality of life.

## ■ Is choosing not to start dialysis considered suicide?

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NO. Choosing not to start dialysis is like any other choice people make when they decide whether or not they want a medical procedure. What makes this decision difficult is that without dialysis, your health will deteriorate and you will eventually die. Canadian healthcare standards accept the decision to not start dialysis as a treatment choice. You are encouraged to speak with your healthcare team and your religious advisor if you are concerned your faith or culture has a different view.

## ■ What will happen to me if I choose no dialysis?

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Each person reacts differently depending on their medical conditions. If you choose not to dialyze, you will need to talk to your doctor about the kind of care you want as your kidneys fail and you begin the dying process. This is called palliative or comfort care. Sometimes, people want to be in hospital during this time. Others may want to make plans to have help and support so they can die at home. Depending on where you live, special support services may be available for this type of home care. You will still have a healthcare team looking after you.

## ■ How do I talk about this choice with my family and friends?

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The decision to not start dialysis can be a very difficult and painful choice to share. It is important to talk about this decision with your loved ones. You may need to help them understand why you made this decision. If you get very sick, your family may have to make treatment decisions for you. For that reason, you need to share your feelings with them. Your renal social worker and other members of your healthcare team can help you prepare for this difficult conversation.

## ■ What kind of support can I get?

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If you choose not to start dialysis, you should talk with your healthcare team about what kind of help is available in the hospital or in your home community. Every community is different and every patient's needs are different.

## ■ Will my doctor and healthcare team help me decide?

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Yes. Your doctor must first recommend that dialysis is a treatment option. Your doctor may offer an opinion if dialysis will actually improve your quality of life. The final decision about starting is yours.

## ■ What if I'm not sure about dialysis – can I try it out first?

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Yes. You may want to ask your doctor about a trial of dialysis to see if and how your quality of life will improve. If, after this period, you feel that dialysis gives you an acceptable quality of life, you may wish to continue treatments. If you feel that dialysis gives little benefit, you may wish to stop dialysis and accept conservative treatment and palliative care.

## ■ What else do I need to have in place?

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Whether you choose dialysis or not, you might want to have your Will, Power of Attorney (personal care and finances), Advance Directives (future healthcare wishes) and funeral arrangements in place. You may also want to talk to your family about your wishes regarding organ and tissue donation. You may want to speak with your renal social worker about available community resources.

## ■ Questions to ask your healthcare team:

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- Do you think that dialysis will improve my quality of life?
- Can I have a short trial of dialysis?
- How will I feel if I choose not to start dialysis?
- Will my healthcare team still look after me?
- How long will I live?
- Can I choose where I die?
- What kind of food and drink can I have?
- If I change my mind, what should I do?
- What can be done if I have any pain or discomfort?
- Who will be there to help support my family and me?

Feel free to add your own questions and bring this list with you.

Your healthcare team cares about you and your family. Please discuss any of these questions with them.

*This brochure is a collaborative effort of:*

- *The Canadian Association of Nephrology Nurses and Technologists (CANNT)*
- *The Canadian Association of Nephrology Social Workers (CANSW)*
- *The Canadian Society of Nephrology (CSN)*
- *The Kidney Foundation of Canada*



# The Kidney Foundation

## OUR VISION

Kidney health, and improved lives for all people affected by kidney disease.

## OUR MISSION

The Kidney Foundation of Canada is the national volunteer organization committed to reducing the burden of kidney disease through:

- funding and stimulating innovative research;
- providing education and support;
- promoting access to high quality healthcare; and
- increasing public awareness and commitment to advancing kidney health and organ donation.

For further information, or if you wish to help us in our efforts, please contact The Kidney Foundation of Canada office in your area. You can also visit our Web site at **[www.kidney.ca](http://www.kidney.ca)**.

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