

Understanding Kidney Stones

Kidney Stones are an often-painful condition that sends more than half a million people to emergency rooms each year. The kidneys are bean-shaped organs located on either side of the spine and below the ribs. They filter wastes and water from the blood to produce urine.

If waste products from the kidneys clump together, hard crystals known as Stones can develop. Drinking too little water is one of the main causes of kidney stones. Eating too much meat or salt, and not getting enough calcium from foods can also play a role.

Additional risk factors include obesity; having a condition such as High Blood Pressure, Gout, or Diabetes; infections; a family history of kidney stones; and taking certain medicines.

“Kidney stone pain is generally a colic type pain, which means it comes in waves; it kind of goes from very mild to excruciatingly intense pain. Generally, this pain is located in the sides of your back and can radiate into the lower belly, in the bladder area.”

Other symptoms include bloody urine; urgent or frequent urination; and nausea and vomiting. If fever occurs, it's important to get immediate medical attention. A urine test may be done to help diagnose kidney stones, along with an imaging test such as a CT scan which can show the location of the stone, its size, and whether it's blocking the flow of urine. Based on test results, your health care provider will come up with a treatment plan.

“If they're small stones, then usually it's just lots and lots of fluid intake to help you pass the stones themselves. There are some medications that can help you increase the flow of urine.”

Your provider may recommend urinating through a special filter that can catch a stone if it passes so it can be analyzed. If the stone doesn't pass, doctors may do a procedure called Shock Wave Lithotripsy, which uses sound waves to break up stones into tiny pieces that are easier to pass. Another option is surgery to remove stones or break them into small pieces.

“If you've ever had kidney stones in the past, then you're at risk for developing kidney stones once again. It's important to help prevent those from reforming to make sure you're drinking plenty of fluids as well as looking at the medications that you're taking.”