How To Prevent Kidney Stones

By Dr. Ramona Warren

Kidney stones are one of the most common urinary tract disorders. It is estimated over one million people in the United States suffer with kidney stones each year, and over a half million people visit emergency rooms annually due to kidney stone problems. In fact, my husband and I ended up spending part of this past Christmas Eve at the hospital when he suffered a kidney stone attack.

Kidney stones are small, hard deposits that form inside the kidneys primarily when the individual is dehydrated, and there is not enough fluid to dilute them. There are different types of stones: calcium stones, oxalate stones, struvite, uric acid and cystine stones. The most common kidney stones are made up of calcium and oxalate. While certain foods contain oxalates, the liver is actually responsible for producing most of the oxalate in the body. Struvite stones are often seen in women who suffer with urinary tract infections. Uric acid stones are more often seen in those with gout or those following high-protein diets, which can lead to the formation of uric acid. Cystine stones are the least common and can be due to a hereditary disorder.

Anyone can suffer with a kidney stone, but those most likely to have kidney stones include people between the ages of 30 and 50. Men are twice more likely than women to develop stones. Other risk factors include:

* Dehydration. Lack of water is the leading cause, as a higher concentration of waste products in your urine can lead to stone formation.
* A diet high in sugar. Sugar, particularly fructose, can interfere with the absorption of calcium and magnesium, which can lead to stone formation.
* Drinking sodas. The phosphoric acid in soda – even sugar-free varieties – acidifies the urine and can lead to the formation of stones.
* Drinking too much iced tea. Black tea contains oxalate, one of the most common types of kidney stone crystals. When you drink sweet tea, you increase your risk even more.
* Magnesium deficiency. It is estimated that 80 percent of Americans are deficient in magnesium. This mineral is important in the absorption and utilization of calcium. When magnesium is low, excess calcium can develop into stones.
* Caffeine and alcohol. These two substances can cause dehydration and lead to kidney stone formation.
* Taking too much vitamin C. High doses of vitamin C, 3-4 grams per day, have been shown to increase kidney stone risk.
* Medications. Diuretics and laxatives can lead to dehydration, thereby increasing your overall risk. Topamax, the medication for migraines and seizures, alters the pH of the urinary tract and can lead to kidney stone formation.
* Not eating enough calcium-rich food. Although most kidney stones are made of calcium, a study conducted on over 45,000 men at Harvard School of Public Health found men with calcium-rich diets had a one-third lower risk for kidney stones. Researchers found the calcium was able to bind with oxalates in the intestine, which decreased kidney stone formation. Extra calcium should come from foods rather than supplements.
* Lack of exercise. Those who are sedentary for long periods of time have a greater risk for stone formation because inactivity causes a loss of calcium from bones.
* Obesity. Increased calorie consumption can increase kidney stone risk by 42 percent.
* High blood pressure. High blood pressure doubles your risk for kidney stones.
* Genetics. If your parents suffered with kidney stones, you are at a higher risk.

Common symptoms include: pain in the back in the lower rib cage area, which can radiate into the lower abdomen and groin, and can come and go, lasting between 5-15 minutes; pain with urination; a feeling of urgency to urinate; urine that is cloudy, foul-smelling or bloody; indigestion, nausea and vomiting; fever and chills may be present if there is an infection.

Although the pain can be debilitating, most people will pass a kidney stone within a few days. However, there are times when a kidney stone can become lodged, and medical intervention is necessary.

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” and this is definitely true for kidney stones. Here are simple steps you can take to reduce your risk and help prevent kidney stones from developing:

1. Drink plenty of water. Urine should be a pale yellow color. If your urine is darker, you are probably not getting enough water. The National Kidney Foundation recommends drinking at least 12 glasses of water per day. The minimum amount of water you should drink in a day is 64 ounces. This amount should be increased if you live in a hot climate, or exercise and sweat a lot.
2. Eat foods high in magnesium, such as green leafy vegetables, cruciferous vegetables, pumpkin seeds, flax seeds, summer squash and salmon. This helps to balance the calcium levels in the body. You can also take a magnesium supplement, but make sure it is the more absorbable form—-either magnesium citrate or magnesium lactate.
3. Use lemons and other citrus fruits, as well as apple cider vinegar. Drinking lemon water in the morning (I prefer hot lemon water) is a good habit that can help reduce stone formation.
4. Eat foods high in vitamin E to help with balancing the oxalates in the body. Good sources of vitamin E include sunflower seeds, almonds, papaya, olives, avocado and blueberries.
5. Get your B vitamins. B vitamins have been shown to help reduce both calcium and oxalates from accumulating. It is best to take a B complex vitamin daily. Some food sources for B vitamins include calves liver, venison, tuna, cod, black beans, sunflower seeds and crimini mushrooms.

Avoiding as many of the risk factors listed above and doing your best to drink plenty of water and eat a healthy diet of vegetables, fruits and lean meats will help reduce your risk for kidney stones. Since my husband has a genetic tendency for kidney stones, he is now making sure he drinks plenty of water, follows the above recommendations, and takes specific supplements to help reduce his risk for recurrence.