

This Silent Health Crisis Is Now Affecting Nearly 800 Million People

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August 25, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Chronic kidney disease now affects an estimated 788 million adults worldwide, roughly one in seven adults, making it one of the largest and fastest-growing chronic health challenges on the planet
- › Most people with kidney disease are in the early stages and often have no obvious symptoms, allowing damage to progress silently for years before it's discovered
- › Kidney disease extends far beyond the kidneys themselves; impaired kidney function contributes to more than one in 10 cardiovascular deaths worldwide by increasing strain on the heart and blood vessels
- › High fasting blood sugar, high blood pressure, and excess body weight were identified as leading contributors to kidney disease-related disability and premature death, highlighting the importance of metabolic health
- › Taking action early by improving blood sugar control, supporting healthy blood pressure, eating potassium-rich whole foods, staying physically active, and monitoring kidney function offers the best opportunity to preserve kidney health long term

Chronic kidney disease is a gradual loss of your kidneys' ability to filter waste, balance fluids, and regulate the minerals your body depends on. What makes it so dangerous is how quietly it begins. Early on, you may notice nothing at all, or you may shrug off vague signs like fatigue, swelling in your legs or feet, or subtle changes in urination. By the time the damage makes itself obvious, much of it has often already been done.

That silence is exactly what makes a recent global analysis so unsettling. Drawing on health data spanning more than three decades and hundreds of countries and territories, researchers set out to measure how far this condition has actually spread, and what they uncovered suggests it has become one of the most widespread chronic threats to human health, with consequences that reach well past the kidneys and into the heart itself.¹

The detail that deserves your attention most, though, isn't the sheer size of the problem. It's that the majority of people whose kidneys are already in trouble have no idea, because the early stages do their damage without raising an alarm. That gap, between how common this condition has become and how rarely it gets caught in time, is the real story. And it starts with what this landmark analysis revealed about the true scope of the crisis.

Kidney Disease Quietly Became One of the World's Biggest Health Threats

Published in The Lancet, this global analysis examined [chronic kidney disease](#) trends across 204 countries and territories between 1990 and 2023. Researchers drew on published studies, household surveys, treatment registries, and national health records to determine how many adults were affected, how many died from the condition, and which risk factors contributed most heavily to the burden of disease.²

Their findings revealed that chronic kidney disease is no longer a niche medical problem; it's become one of the largest health challenges facing adults worldwide.

- **The number of affected adults more than doubled in three decades** — According to the analysis, 788 million adults were living with chronic kidney disease in 2023, compared to 378 million in 1990. Researchers reported that the global prevalence reached 14.2% of adults, meaning roughly one in seven adults now has some level of kidney damage or impaired kidney function.³

For you, that reframes the question — kidney disease is no longer a problem confined to a high-risk few, which means the odds it's relevant to you personally are higher than you might assume.

- **Most people are stuck in the silent stages** — The overwhelming majority of cases occurred in stages 1 through 3. These are the earlier phases of kidney disease, when the kidneys still perform much of their job but damage has already begun. Researchers estimated that stage 1 through stage 3 disease accounted for a combined prevalence of 13.9% of adults worldwide.

This matters because early kidney disease rarely causes obvious symptoms. You can feel completely normal while damage progresses in the background. That creates a challenge, but it also creates an opportunity. If you identify the problem early, you have a much larger window to address the factors that drive further decline.

- **Kidney disease reaches far beyond the kidneys themselves** — The analysis found that chronic kidney disease ranked as the ninth leading cause of death globally in 2023, accounting for approximately 1.48 million deaths. Researchers also calculated that impaired kidney function contributed to 11.5% of cardiovascular deaths worldwide.

Unhealthy kidneys place extra stress on your entire circulatory system. Your kidneys help regulate fluid levels, [blood pressure](#), and numerous chemical signals throughout the body. As kidney function declines, the strain extends to the heart and blood vessels, increasing the likelihood of serious cardiovascular problems.

- **Blood sugar emerged as the biggest contributor to kidney-related health loss** — When researchers compared risk factors, high fasting blood glucose accounted for the largest share of kidney-related disability-adjusted life years — a measure that combines years lost to illness and to premature death — at 31.9%. High systolic blood pressure (24.5%) and excess body weight (23.5%) followed closely behind, while dietary factors accounted for 17.6%.

Because these figures come from an observational analysis, they show how strongly each factor is associated with kidney-related health loss — not that any one directly causes it. Even so, improving **blood sugar control**, maintaining healthy blood pressure, and managing excess weight may help address the factors contributing the greatest share of kidney-related health loss worldwide.

- **Age dramatically increased the burden, but the trend affected all adults —** Researchers observed that both the prevalence and severity of chronic kidney disease rose steadily with age. More advanced stages became increasingly common among older adults, while the contribution of high blood pressure to kidney-related disease burden also increased with advancing age.

Yet the findings were not limited to seniors. The study focused on adults beginning at age 20, highlighting that kidney damage often develops decades before severe symptoms appear. If you think of kidney health as a long-term challenge rather than an old-age problem, you gain a major advantage. Every positive step you take today gives your kidneys a better chance of functioning well years from now.

Support Your Kidney Health and Lower Your Risk

The findings from this global analysis point to a simple reality: Chronic kidney disease rarely begins in the kidneys alone. The biggest contributors were high blood sugar, high blood pressure, and excess body weight. That means the most effective strategy is to address the metabolic and lifestyle factors that place stress on your kidneys year after year.

High blood pressure deserves special attention because it doesn't just accompany kidney disease — it also contributes to it. Over time, elevated pressure damages the tiny blood vessels inside your kidneys, reducing their ability to filter waste efficiently, while declining kidney function often pushes blood pressure even higher. The earlier you address the factors that strain both your blood vessels and your kidneys, the greater your opportunity to preserve kidney function for decades.

The following strategies are for prevention and early-stage risk reduction; anyone with diagnosed kidney disease should treat potassium, protein, and fluid targets as clinician-directed, because the right numbers flip once function is significantly impaired.

- 1. Make blood sugar control your first priority** — High fasting blood sugar was the largest contributor to kidney disease burden worldwide. When blood sugar remains elevated, excess glucose damages the small blood vessels that allow your kidneys to filter waste effectively. Focus on improving metabolic health with whole foods, adequate protein, and healthy carbohydrates that match your activity level.

For most adults, that means approximately 250 grams of carbohydrates daily, with higher amounts if you're physically active. Prioritize ripe fruit, root vegetables, and other nutrient-dense carbohydrate sources while eliminating ultraprocessed foods, including [seed oils](#) and sugary beverages.

Because protein is essential for maintaining muscle and metabolic health, aim for roughly 0.8 grams of protein per pound (or 1.76 grams per kilogram) of ideal body weight, with approximately one-third coming from [collagen-rich sources](#) like slow-cooked meats or bone broth.

- 2. Improve your blood pressure by improving your metabolism** — High blood pressure ranked among the leading contributors to chronic kidney disease worldwide. Yet blood pressure often reflects deeper metabolic problems rather than an isolated condition. Excess weight, poor blood sugar control, chronic stress, and nutrient imbalances all place additional strain on your blood vessels and kidneys.

If you're carrying excess weight, improving body composition often reduces pressure on both systems simultaneously. Daily movement, strength training, adequate sleep, and stress reduction support healthy blood pressure while helping protect your kidneys from further wear and tear. Even a daily walking routine creates meaningful improvements over time.

3. Restore a healthy sodium-to-potassium balance — Many people focus exclusively on reducing salt, but healthy blood pressure depends heavily on maintaining the proper **balance between sodium and potassium**. The larger problem is that most dietary sodium comes from ultraprocessed foods that contain very little potassium while delivering excess sugar, **phosphate additives**, seed oils, and other compounds that increase your kidneys' workload.

Instead of aggressively restricting salt, focus on removing ultraprocessed foods and replacing them with whole-food potassium sources such as ripe fruit, root vegetables, and well-cooked greens. This strategy supports fluid balance, healthy blood pressure, and kidney function at the same time. It also reduces exposure to additives that place additional stress on kidney tissue.

One important exception: If you already have diagnosed kidney disease, especially stage 3b or beyond, don't increase dietary potassium without checking with your doctor and knowing your latest labs. Once kidney function is significantly reduced, the kidneys can't clear potassium efficiently, and too much can become dangerous. The advice to raise potassium applies to prevention and early-stage risk reduction, not to established, more advanced disease.

4. Optimize vitamin D through sensible sun exposure and daily movement — Vitamin D helps regulate the hormonal system that controls blood pressure and fluid balance. When vitamin D levels remain low, that system may become overstimulated, which research has linked to increased tension in your blood vessels and added strain on your kidneys.

Regular sun exposure helps to support vitamin D production, cellular energy generation, and healthy circulation. Aim for a vitamin D level between 60 and 80 ng/mL (150 to 200 nmol/L). If you still consume significant amounts of seed oils and other sources of **linoleic acid** (LA), avoid intense sun exposure until you have reduced those foods for at least six months.

This is because LA is a polyunsaturated fat that oxidizes easily, builds up in your skin, and increases your risk of skin damage. Pair sunlight with regular movement. An hour of walking, cycling, swimming, or similar activity each day improves circulation, supports healthy blood sugar levels, and reduces pressure on your kidneys' filtering units. If you're just getting started, even 10-minute sessions create momentum.

- 5. Stay hydrated, reduce unnecessary kidney stress, and screen early** — For healthy kidneys, hydration helps dilute and remove waste while lowering kidney-stone risk, and thirst is usually a reliable guide. If you've been diagnosed with kidney disease, fluid needs can change — sometimes downward — so follow your doctor's guidance rather than thirst alone.

Pale yellow urine also generally reflects adequate hydration. If you have a history of kidney stones, pay attention to foods high in oxalates, including spinach, sweet potatoes, and figs.

Pairing oxalate-containing foods with calcium-rich foods helps bind oxalates in your digestive tract so fewer reach your kidneys. At the same time, reduce phosphorus from processed foods, colas, and fast-food meats, since excess phosphorus disrupts mineral balance and places additional strain on kidney tissue.

If you have high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, a family history of kidney disease, or other metabolic risk factors, make kidney screening part of your routine. Ask specifically for two tests: an eGFR (estimated glomerular filtration rate), which estimates how much blood your kidneys filter each minute, and a urine albumin-to-creatinine ratio (uACR), which catches protein leaking through damaged filters — often the earliest warning sign, before eGFR has budged.

Because early-stage kidney disease often produces no symptoms, these simple tests help identify problems long before significant damage occurs.

If you are considering kidney-function or vitamin D testing, talk to your health care provider about whether they're appropriate for you.

FAQs About Chronic Kidney Disease

Q: What is chronic kidney disease and why is it called a silent health crisis?

A: Chronic kidney disease is a gradual loss of kidney function that often develops without obvious symptoms. Many people remain unaware they have it because early-stage kidney disease rarely causes noticeable problems. By the time symptoms become clear, significant damage has often already occurred.

Q: How common is chronic kidney disease?

A: According to the global analysis published in The Lancet, an estimated 788 million adults were living with chronic kidney disease in 2023. The condition now affects roughly one in seven adults worldwide and has more than doubled in prevalence since 1990.

Q: What are the biggest factors driving chronic kidney disease?

A: The leading contributors identified in the research were high fasting blood sugar, high blood pressure, and excess body weight. These metabolic factors damage the blood vessels that supply the kidneys and increase the strain placed on the kidneys over time.

Q: How does kidney disease affect the rest of the body?

A: Kidney disease affects far more than waste filtration. The kidneys help regulate blood pressure, fluid balance, and numerous chemical signals throughout your body. As kidney function declines, the risk of cardiovascular disease rises substantially.

Researchers estimated that impaired kidney function contributes to 11.5% of cardiovascular deaths worldwide.

Q: What are the most important steps to protect kidney health?

A: Focus on addressing the root causes of kidney damage before permanent decline occurs. Maintain healthy blood sugar levels, improve blood pressure through better metabolic health, restore a healthy sodium-to-potassium balance with whole foods, optimize vitamin D through sensible sun exposure and regular movement, stay hydrated, and monitor kidney function early if you have risk factors such as diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, or a family history of kidney disease.

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a qualified health care provider before making changes to your health regimen.

Sources and References

- ^{1, 2, 3} [The Lancet November 22, 2025, Volume 406, Issue 10518, P2461-2482](#)