



End of Life Care for Renal Patients

Questions & Answers

Q: How do major religions feel about people choosing to stop dialysis?

A: Many organized religions, such as the Roman Catholic religion, the Eastern Orthodox religion, and most Protestant denominations believe it is acceptable for people to stop dialysis if the suffering involved with dialysis outweighs the benefits. Some religions, such as Orthodox Judaism and Islam, believe it would be acceptable to stop dialysis only if the patient is imminently dying. If patients have concerns about their religion's views on stopping dialysis, it is suggested that they consult with their clergy.

Q: How do we know that stopping dialysis is not suicide?

A: Suicide occurs when a person takes an action to cause his/her death. People who commit suicide do not die naturally. When a patient stops dialysis, the cause of death is kidney failure. The death is natural. Before a patient makes a final decision to stop dialysis, he/she should be evaluated for depression and other treatable disorders. Discussions should also take place between the patient, the patient's family and loved ones, and members of the renal care team.

Q: Does choosing to stop dialysis mean that staff and family have let the patient down?

A: The short answer to this question is "No". No one has "let the patient down" if a decision has been made to stop dialysis. Patients usually choose to stop dialysis because they are no longer satisfied with their quality of life. When a patient asks about stopping dialysis, it is important for the renal care team to evaluate the patient to be sure that there are no treatable causes of the patient's dissatisfaction with dialysis. Once the patient makes an informed decision to stop dialysis their wishes should be respected.

Q: Do life insurance companies pay survivors if people choose to stop dialysis?

A: Yes. Stopping dialysis is a natural death so life insurance policies are paid.

Mission Statement

To provide leadership and assistance to renal dialysis and transplant facilities in a manner that supports continuous improvement in patient care, outcomes, safety and satisfaction.

End-of-Life for Renal Patients – Questions and Answers

Q: How long does it take to die if a patient stops dialysis?

A: Most patients who stop dialysis die within 8 to 12 days. An occasional patient who has near normal urine output may live several weeks to a month.

Q: Is it painful to die after stopping dialysis?

A: For most patients, not usually. Patients who stop dialysis usually become very sleepy after a few days and then die in their sleep. Dying from stopping dialysis is considered to be one of the least painful ways to die. For patients who experience pain, the Medicare hospice benefit allows for patients who are at home to go to the hospice facility to manage pain or other symptoms that cannot be managed well at home.

Q: How come some patients don't die within the predicted time period?

A: Some patients who have some kidney function left may live several weeks to a month or so beyond the expected survival time. Patients who are very sick with infections, heart or lung disease may not even live a week or two after stopping dialysis.

Q: Are there medications a patient can take to help in this period of no dialysis?

A: Yes. Patients can take medications to relieve shortness of breath and pain. Patients can also take medications to relieve muscle jerks and nausea, and oxygen for shortness of breath.

Q: Can patients eat whatever they like when they stop dialysis?

A: Yes. Patients may eat what they want. Some patients will continue to limit their fluid intake to avoid fluid build up in the lungs. These issues are discussed with patients who choose to stop dialysis.

Q: Will the patient who stops dialysis swell up like a balloon?

A: No, not if the patient is careful about his/her fluid intake. Most patients who are dying are not thirsty and so drinking a lot of fluid after stopping dialysis rarely happens.

Q: Do younger patients have the right to stop dialysis?

A: Yes. Regardless of age, the reason why dialysis is stopped is because the burdens associated with it are too great. Occasionally even infants and children have dialysis stopped because continued life with dialysis is causing extreme suffering without a likelihood of benefit.

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Q: If the patient feels a whole lot better once he stops dialysis, does this mean that he is getting better and that he should go back on dialysis?

A: No, patients who stop dialysis often report feeling better for the first 3 to 4 days after stopping dialysis. Patients often say that just having made the decision takes a burden off their minds, and they feel more relaxed. Also not going to dialysis treatment 3 times a week, they are less tired from the travel and do not have the “washed out” feeling that many patients get after dialysis.

Q: If an older person has dementia, is it homicide for the family to stop dialysis?

A: No, patients with dementia often do not understand the dialysis process. Sometimes it is even necessary to restrain them (literally tie them down) to keep them from pulling out their dialysis needles during the treatment. Undergoing dialysis can cause severe agitation for patients with dementia. Patients with advanced dementia who do not understand the dialysis treatment and cannot cooperate with it are patients for whom stopping dialysis should be considered.