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America is inundated everyday with health news. With the well-founded worries about cancer, heart disease and

ARE YOU CARING FOR YOUR KIDNEYS?

diabetes — among many — we often forget about the little things. Like our kidneys.

The fact is that nearly eight million Americans have seriously reduced kidney function. Blacks have a four times greater risk of developing kidney disease than white Americans.

The kidneys (each person has two) are bean-shaped vital organs, located near the middle of your back, just below the rib cage. Kidneys can be compared to trash collectors — sifting out waste products and extra urine from your blood. The wastes in your blood come from the

normal breakdown of active muscle and from the food you eat. Your body uses the food for energy and self-repair. After your body has taken what it needs from the food, waste is sent to the blood. If your kidneys did not remove these wastes, the wastes would build up in the blood and damage your body. The actual filtering occurs in tiny units inside your kidneys called nephrons.

KIDNEY DISEASE

Most kidney diseases attack these nephrons, causing them to lose their filtering capacity. Damage to the nephrons may happen quickly, often as the result of injury or poisoning. But most kidney diseases destroy the nephrons slowly or silently.

According to the National Institutes of Health, the two most common causes of kidney disease are diabetes and high blood pressure. If your family has a history of any kind of kidney problems, Please turn to **KIDNEYS 18B**

Kidney disease causes and basic information

KIDNEYS

continued from 17B

you may be at risk for kidney disease.

SIGNS OF KIDNEY DISEASE

Early stages of kidney disease may not cause any symptoms at all. And the first signs of sickness tend to be general: frequent headaches or feeling tired or itchy all over your body.

As kidney disease worsens, you may feel the need to urinate more often or less often. Some people also lose their appetites and experience nausea or vomiting. Other symptoms may include swelling or numbness in the hands or feet, drowsiness, difficulty concentrating, darkening skin and muscle cramps.

TREATMENT FOR KIDNEY DISEASE

If you are in the early stages of a kidney disease, you may be able to make your kidneys last longer by taking certain steps:

- If you have diabetes, watch your blood sugar closely and be sure to consult your doctor on how to control the condition.

- Have your blood pressure checked regularly and talk with your doctor about ways to keep your blood pressure under control.

- Be sure to talk with your doctor about the effects your diet may have on your kidney function.

- Also talk with your doctor about the affects of protein, cholesterol, sodium and potassium.

- If you notice a sharp stabbing pain in your side, back or abdomen, you may have kidney stones. See a doctor immediately. Try to drink lots of water while you're waiting to see the doctor — it will help flush out the stones from your system.

- If you've had kidney stones before, or they run in your family, be sure to drink lots of water — at least eight glasses per day, and more in hot weather.

- Don't drink alcohol and take over-the-counter painkillers at the same time. This combination can bring on kidney failure.

Complete and irreversible kidney disease is sometimes called end-stage renal disease, or ESRD. When your kidneys stop working completely, your body may fill with extra water and waste products, also known as uremia. This may cause

swelling, tiredness and weakness. Untreated uremia may lead to seizures or coma and will ultimately result in death.

When kidneys stop working completely, dialysis or kidney transplantation is necessary. There are two major forms of dialysis — hemodialysis, in which blood is sent through a machine that filters away waste products, and peritoneal dialysis, where fluid is put in to the abdomen to capture waste products from the blood.

Kidney transplant requires a donated kidney from an anonymous donor who has recently died or from a living person, usually a relative. The healthy kidney must be a match for the patient's body to help prevent rejection by the body's immune system.

It's important to remember that your kidneys are vital organs that keep your blood clean and chemically balanced. If you would like more information about kidney disease or end-stage renal disease, be sure to talk to your doctor.

For more information about North Shore Medical Center, please call 305-835-6000 or for a physician referral please call 1-800-984-3434.