

# Kidney Cancer

The National Cancer Institute (<http://www.cancer.gov/>), lists kidney cancer as one of 13 common causes of cancer and provides the following information.

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## Understanding Cancer

Cancer begins in cells, the building blocks that make up *tissues*. Tissues make up the organs of the body. Normally, cells grow and divide to form new cells as the body needs them. When cells grow old, they die, and new cells take their place.

Sometimes this orderly process goes wrong. New cells form when the body does not need them, and old cells do not die when they should. These extra cells can form a mass of tissue called a growth or *tumor*.

Not all tumors are cancer. Tumors can be *benign* or *malignant*.

**Benign tumors** are not cancer:

- Benign tumors are rarely life-threatening.
- Usually, benign tumors can be removed, and they seldom grow back.
- Cells from benign tumors do not spread to tissues around them or to other parts of the body.

**Malignant tumors** are cancer:

- Malignant tumors generally are more serious than benign tumors. They may be life-threatening.
- Malignant tumors often can be removed, but they can grow back.
- Cells from malignant tumors can invade and damage nearby tissues and organs. Also, cancer cells can break away from a malignant tumor and enter the bloodstream or lymphatic system. That is how cancer cells spread from the original cancer (*primary tumor*) to form new tumors in other organs. The spread of cancer is called *metastasis*.

## Kidney Cancer (Renal Cell)

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) booklet (NIH Publication No. 03-1569) has important information about *cancer* of the kidney. It discusses possible causes, symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment. It also has information to help patients cope with kidney cancer.

## Kidney Cancer: Who's at Risk?

Kidney cancer develops most often in people over 40, but no one knows the exact causes of this disease. Doctors can seldom explain why one person develops kidney cancer and another does not. However, it is clear that kidney cancer is not contagious. No one can "catch" the disease from another person.

Research has shown that people with certain *risk factors* are more likely than others to develop kidney cancer. A risk factor is anything that increases a person's chance of developing a disease.

Studies have found the following risk factors for kidney cancer:

- **Smoking:** Cigarette smoking is a major risk factor. Cigarette smokers are twice as likely as nonsmokers to develop kidney cancer. Cigar smoking also may increase the risk of this disease.
- **Obesity:** People who are *obese* have an increased risk of kidney cancer.
- **High blood pressure:** High blood pressure increases the risk of kidney cancer.
- **Long-term dialysis:** Dialysis is a treatment for people whose kidneys do not work well. It removes wastes from the blood. Being on dialysis for many years is a risk factor for kidney cancer.
- **Von Hippel-Lindau (VHL) syndrome:** VHL is a rare disease that runs in some families. It is caused by changes in the VHL *gene*. An abnormal VHL gene increases the risk of kidney cancer. It also can cause *cysts* or tumors in the eyes, brain, and other parts of the body. Family members of those with this syndrome can have a test to check for the abnormal VHL gene. For people with the abnormal VHL gene, doctors may suggest ways to improve the detection of kidney cancer and other diseases before *symptoms* develop.
- **Occupation:** Some people have a higher risk of getting kidney cancer because they come in contact with certain chemicals or substances in their workplace. Coke oven workers in the iron and steel industry are at risk. Workers exposed to *asbestos* or *cadmium* also may be at risk.
- **Gender:** Males are more likely than females to be diagnosed with kidney cancer. Each year in the United States, about 20,000 men and 12,000 women learn they have kidney cancer.

Most people who have these risk factors do not get kidney cancer. On the other hand, most people who do get the disease have no known risk factors. People who think they may be at risk should discuss this concern with their doctor. The doctor may be able to suggest ways to reduce the risk and can plan an appropriate schedule for checkups.

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