Tactics to prevent or slow progression of CKD in patients with diabetes

Annual screening of urinary parameters, ongoing clinical vigilance, and proper medical therapy can help to keep declining renal function at bay.

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is a significant comorbidity of diabetes mellitus. The Kidney Disease Outcomes Quality Initiative (KDOQI) of the National Kidney Foundation defines CKD as the presence of kidney damage or decreased kidney function for ≥ 3 months. CKD caused by diabetes is called diabetic kidney disease (DKD), which is 1 of 3 principal microvascular complications of diabetes. DKD can progress to end-stage renal disease (ESRD), requiring kidney replacement therapy, and is the leading cause of CKD and ESRD in the United States. Studies have also shown that, particularly in patients with diabetes, CKD considerably increases the risk of cardiovascular events, which often occur prior to ESRD.

This article provides the latest recommendations for evaluating and managing DKD to help you prevent or slow its progression.

**Defining and categorizing diabetic kidney disease**

CKD is defined as persistently elevated excretion of urinary albumin (albuminuria) and decreased estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR), or as the presence of signs of progressive kidney damage. DKD, also known as diabetic nephropathy, is CKD attributed to long-term diabetes. A patient’s eGFR is the established basis for assignment to a stage (1, 2, 3a, 3b, 4, or 5) of CKD (TABLE 1) and, along with the category of albuminuria (A1, A2, or A3), can indicate prognosis.

**Taking its toll in diabetes**

As many as 40% of patients with diabetes develop DKD. Most studies of DKD have been conducted in patients with type 1 diabetes (T1D), because the time of clinical onset is typically known.
Type 1 diabetes. DKD usually occurs 10 to 15 years, or later, after the onset of diabetes. As many as 30% of people with T1D have albuminuria approximately 15 years after onset of diabetes; almost one-half of those develop DKD. After approximately 22.5 years without albuminuria, patients with T1D have approximately a 1% annual risk of DKD. With appropriate treatment, albuminuria can regress, and the risk of ESRD can be <20% at 10 years in T1D.

Type 2 diabetes (T2D). DKD is often present at diagnosis, likely due to a delay in diagnosis and brief clinical exposure, compared to T1D. Albuminuria has been reported in as many as 40% of patients with T2D approximately 10 years after onset of diabetes.

Multiple risk factors with no standout “predictor”
Genetic susceptibility, ethnicity, glycemic control, smoking, blood pressure (BP), and the eGFR have been identified as risk factors for renal involvement in diabetes; obesity, oral contraceptives, and age can also contribute. Although each risk factor increases the risk of DKD, no single factor is adequately predictive. Moderately increased albuminuria, the earliest sign of DKD, is associated with progressive nephropathy.

How great is the risk?
From disease onset to proteinuria and from proteinuria to ESRD, the risk of DKD in T1D and T2D is similar. With appropriate treatment, albuminuria can regress, and the risk of ESRD can be <20% at 10 years in T1D. As in T1D, good glycemic control might result in regression of albuminuria in T2D. For unknown reasons, the degree of albuminuria can exist independent of the progression of DKD. Factors responsible for a progressive decline in eGFR in DKD without albuminuria are unknown.
Patient evaluation with an eye toward comorbidities

A comprehensive initial medical evaluation for DKD includes a review of microvascular complications; visits to specialists; lifestyle and behavior patterns (eg, diet, sleep, substance use, and social support); and medication adherence, adverse drug effects, and alternative medicines. Although DKD is often a clinical diagnosis, it can be ruled in by persistent albuminuria or decreased eGFR, or both, in established diabetes or diabetic retinopathy when other causes are unlikely (see “Recommended DKD screening protocol,” below).

Screening for mental health conditions and barriers to self-management is also key.6

Comorbidities, of course, can complicate disease management in patients with diabetes.16-20 Providers and patients therefore need to be aware of potential diabetic comorbidities. For example, DKD and even moderately increased albuminuria significantly increase the risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD).12 Other possible comorbidities include (but are not limited to) nonalcoholic steatohepatitis, fracture, hearing impairment, cancer (eg, liver, pancreas, endometrium, colon, rectum, breast, and bladder), pancreatitis, hypogonadism, obstructive sleep apnea, periodontal disease, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders.6

Recommended DKD screening protocol

In all cases of T2D, in cases of T1D of ≥ 5 years’ duration, and in patients with diabetes and comorbid hypertension, perform annual screening for albuminuria, an elevated creatinine level, and a decline in eGFR. To confirm the diagnosis of DKD, at least 2 of 3 urine specimens must demonstrate an elevated urinary albumin:creatinine ratio (UACR) over a 3- to 6-month period.21 Apart from renal damage, exercise within 24 hours before specimen collection, infection, fever, congestive heart failure, hyperglycemia, menstruation, and hypertension can elevate the UACR.6

Levels of the UACR are established as follows22:

- Normal UACR is defined as < 30 milligrams of albumin per gram of creatinine (expressed as “mg/g”).
- Increased urinary albumin excretion is defined as ≥ 30 mg/g.
- Moderately increased albuminuria, a predictor of potential nephropathy, is the excretion of 30 to 300 mg/g.
- Severely increased albuminuria is excretion > 300 mg/g; it is often followed by a gradual decline in eGFR that, without treatment, eventually leads to ESRD.

The rate of decline in eGFR once albuminuria is severely increased is equivalent in T1D and T2D.12 Without intervention, the time from severely increased albuminuria to ESRD in T1D and T2D averages approximately 6 or 7 years.

Clinical features

DKD is typically a clinical diagnosis seen in patients with longstanding diabetes, albuminuria, retinopathy, or a reduced eGFR in the absence of another primary cause of kidney damage. In patients with T1D and DKD, signs of retinopathy and neuropathy are almost always present at diagnosis, unless a diagnosis is made early in the course of diabetes.12 Therefore, the presence of retinopathy suggests that diabetes is the likely cause of CKD.

The presence of microvascular disease in patients with T2D and DKD is less predictable.12 In T2D patients who do not have retinopathy, consider causes of CKD other than DKD. Features suggesting that the cause of CKD is an underlying condition other than diabetes are rapidly increasing albuminuria or decreasing eGFR; urinary sediment comprising red blood cells or white blood cells; and nephrotic syndrome.6

As the prevalence of diabetes increases, it has become more common to diagnose DKD by eGFR without albuminuria—underscoring the importance of routine monitoring of eGFR in patients with diabetes.6

Sources of expert guidance. The Chronic Kidney Disease Epidemiology Collaboration equation23 is preferred for calculating eGFR from serum creatinine: An eGFR < 60 mL/min/1.73 m² is considered abnormal.1,12 At these rates, the prevalence of com-
Complications related to CKD rise and screening for complications becomes necessary.

A more comprehensive classification of the stages of CKD, incorporating albuminuria and progression of CKD, has been recommended by Kidney Disease: Improving Global Outcomes (KDIGO). Because eGFR and excretion of albumin vary, abnormal test results need to be verified over time to stage the degree of CKD. Kidney damage often manifests as albuminuria, but also as hematuria, other types of abnormal urinary sediment, radiographic abnormalities, and other abnormal presentations.

Management

Nutritional factors

- **Excessive protein intake** has been shown to increase albuminuria, worsen renal function, and increase CVD mortality in DKD. Therefore, daily dietary protein intake of 0.8 g/kg body weight is recommended for patients who are not on dialysis. Patients on dialysis might require higher protein intake to preserve muscle mass caused by protein-energy wasting, which is common in dialysis patients.

- **Low sodium intake** in CKD patients has been shown to decrease BP and thus slow the progression of renal disease and lower the risk of CVD. The recommended dietary sodium intake in CKD patients is 1500-3000 mg/d.

- **Low potassium intake.** Hyperkalemia is a serious complication of CKD. A low-potassium diet is recommended in ESRD patients who have a potassium level > 5.5 mEq/L.

**Blood pressure**

Preventing and treating hypertension is critical to slowing the progression of CKD and reducing cardiovascular risk. BP should be measured at every clinic visit. Aside from lifestyle changes, medication might be needed to reach target BP.

- **The American Diabetes Association** recommends a BP goal of ≤ 140/90 mm Hg for hypertensive patients with diabetes, although they do state that a lower BP target (≤ 130/80 mm Hg) might be more appropriate for patients with DKD.

- **The American College of Cardiology** recommends that hypertensive patients with CKD have a BP target of ≤ 130/80 mm Hg.

- **Angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors and angiotensin II receptor blockers (ARBs)** have renoprotective benefits. These agents are recommended as first-line medications for patients with diabetes, hypertension, and an eGFR < 60 mL/min/1.73 m² and a UACR > 300 mg/g. Evidence also supports their use when the UACR is 30 to 299 mg/g.

Studies have shown that, in patients with DKD, ACE inhibitors and ARBs can slow the progression of renal disease. There is no difference between ACE inhibitors and ARBs in their effectiveness for preventing progression of DKD. There is no added benefit in combining an ACE inhibitor and an

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**TABLE 2**

Screening for mineral and bone disorder in CKD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE OF CKD (BASED ON THE eGFR)</th>
<th>Analyte</th>
<th>Calcium and potassium</th>
<th>Parathyroid hormone</th>
<th>Alkaline phosphatase</th>
<th>25-hydroxyvitamin D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1 (≥ 90)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Every 6-12 mo</td>
<td>Once, then repeated as necessary based on level and progression of CKD</td>
<td>Every 12 mo</td>
<td>Once, then repeated as necessary based on level and treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2 (60-89)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3 (30-59)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 4 (15-29)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Every 3-6 mo</td>
<td>Every 6-12 mo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 5 (&lt; 15)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Every 1-3 mo</td>
<td>Every 3-6 mo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CKD, chronic kidney disease; eGFR, estimated glomerular filtration rate

* mL/min/1.73 m².
Confirmation of suspected DKD requires an elevated albumin:creatinine ratio in at least 2 of 3 urine specimens over a 3- to 6-month period.

ACE inhibitors and ARBs should be used with caution in women of childbearing age, who should use a reliable form of contraception if taking one of these drugs.

Diuretics. Thiazide-type and loop diuretics might potentiate the positive effects of ACE inhibitors and ARBs. KDOQI guidelines recommend that, in patients who require a second agent to control BP, a diuretic should be considered in combination with an ACE inhibitor or an ARB. A loop diuretic is preferred if the eGFR is < 30 mL/min/1.73 m².

Nondihydropyridine calcium-channel blockers (CCBs), such as diltiazem and verapamil, have been shown to be more effective than dihydropyridine CCBs, such as amlodipine and nifedipine, in slowing the progression of renal disease because of their antiproteinuric effects. However, the antiproteinuric effects of nondihydropyridine CCBs are not as strong as those of ACE inhibitors or ARBs, and these drugs do not appear to potentiate the effects of an ACE inhibitor or ARB when used in combination.

Mineralocorticoid receptor antagonists in combination with an ACE inhibitor or ARB have been demonstrated to reduce albuminuria in short-term studies.

Glycemic levels

Studies conducted in patients with T1D, and others in patients with T2D, have shown that tight glycemic control can delay the onset and slow the progression of albuminuria and a decline in the eGFR. The target glycated hemoglobin (A1C) should be < 7% to prevent or slow progression of DKD. However, patients with DKD have an increased risk of hypoglycemic events and increased mortality with more intensive glycemic control.

Given those findings, some patients with DKD and significant comorbidities, ESRD, or limited life expectancy might need to have an A1C target set at 8%.

Adjustments to antidiabetes medications in DKD

In patients with stages 3 to 5 DKD, several common antidiabetic medications might need to be adjusted or discontinued because they decrease creatinine clearance.

First-generation sulfonylureas should be avoided in DKD. Glipizide and gliclazide are preferred among second-generation sulfonylureas because they do not increase the risk of hypoglycemia in DKD patients, although patients taking these medications still require close monitoring of their blood glucose level.

Metformin. In 2016, recommendations changed for the use of metformin in patients with DKD: The eGFR, not the serum creatinine level, should guide treatment. Metformin can be used safely in patients with (1) an eGFR of < 60 mL/min/1.73 m² and (2) an eGFR of 30 mL/min/1.73 m² with close monitoring. Metformin should not be initiated if the eGFR is < 45 mL/min/1.73 m².

Antidiabetes medications with direct effect on the kidney

Several antidiabetes medications have a direct effect on the kidney apart from their effect on the blood glucose level.

Sodium-glucose co-transporter 2 (SGLT2) inhibitors have been shown to reduce albuminuria and slow the decrease of eGFR independent of glycemic control. In addition, SGLT2 inhibitors have also been shown to have cardiovascular benefits in patients with DKD.

Glucagon-like peptide 1 (GLP-1) receptor agonists have been shown to delay and decrease the progression of DKD. Also, similar to what is seen with SGLT2 inhibitors, GLP-1 agonists have demonstrable cardiovascular benefit in patients with DKD.

Dyslipidemia and DKD

Because the risk of CVD is increased in patients with DKD, addressing other modifiable risk factors, including dyslipidemia, is recom-
Complications of CKD

- **Anemia** is a common complication of CKD. KDIGO recommends measuring the hemoglobin concentration annually in DKD stage 3 patients without anemia; at least every 6 months in stage 4 patients; and at least every 3 months in stage 5. DKD patients with anemia should have additional laboratory testing: the absolute reticulocyte count, serum ferritin, serum transferrin saturation, vitamin B12, and folate.51

- **Mineral and bone disorder** should be screened for in patients with DKD. TABLE 2 outlines when clinical laboratory tests should be ordered to assess for mineral bone disease.6

When to refer to a nephrologist

Refer patients with stage 4 or 5 CKD (eGFR, ≤ 30 mL/min/1.73 m²) to a nephrologist for discussion of kidney replacement therapy.6 Patients with stage 3a CKD and severely increased albuminuria or with stage 3b CKD and moderately or severely increased albuminuria should also be referred to a nephrologist for intervention to delay disease progression.

Identifying the need for early referral to a nephrologist has been shown to reduce the cost, and improve the quality, of care.53 Other indications for earlier referral include uncertainty about the etiology of renal disease, persistent or severe albuminuria, persistent hematuria, a rapid decline in eGFR, and acute kidney injury. Additionally, referral at an earlier stage of DKD might be needed to assist with complications associated with DKD, such as anemia, secondary hyperparathyroidism, mineral and bone disorder, resistant hypertension, fluid overload, and electrolyte disturbances.6

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors thank Colleen Colbert, PhD, and Iqbal Ahmad, PhD, for their review and critique of the manuscript of this article. They also thank Christopher Babliuch, MD, for his guidance in the preparation of the manuscript.

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**References**


Nutritional control is important in DKD: A low-sodium diet can slow progression of DKD, and a low-potassium diet can prevent hyperkalemia in end-stage renal disease.