

Obstructive nephropathy

Kidney damage from a urinary blockage

A blockage stops urine from draining, so it backs up into the kidney. Relieving the blockage early gives the kidney the best chance to recover.

What is it?

Urine flows from each kidney down a tube (the ureter) to the bladder, then out through another tube (the urethra). If something blocks this path, urine backs up and the kidney swells (hydronephrosis). If the blockage lasts, the kidney can be damaged.

Common causes

- an enlarged prostate (in men)
- kidney stones
- a bladder that doesn't empty well, from nerve problems or some medicines
- narrowing or scarring of the urinary tubes
- a growth pressing on the urinary tract

What you might notice

- **Sudden blockage:** pain in your side or back, nausea or vomiting.
- **Slow blockage:** often no pain. You may have a weak stream, trouble starting, or need to go often or at night.
- Passing less urine, or infections that keep coming back.

How it's found

- kidney and bladder ultrasound, the main test
- a bladder scan to see how much urine is left after you go
- blood tests, and sometimes a CT scan

How it's treated

A urologist often helps. Treatment depends on the cause:

- a catheter (thin tube) to drain the bladder
- a stent (small tube) inside the ureter, or a tube through the back into the kidney (nephrostomy)
- treating the cause, such as removing a stone or treating the prostate

Kidney function often improves once the blockage is relieved, especially when it's treated early.

Some people pass a lot of urine for a few days afterward, so your team will check your fluids and blood tests.

What you can do

- Tell your health care provider about changes in how you pass urine.
- If you have a stent or tube, know when it should be changed or removed, and keep those appointments.
- Ask your pharmacist if any of your medicines, including some cold and allergy products, can make it harder to pass urine.

Go to the nearest emergency department if you have

- fever or chills along with a kidney stone, blockage, stent or tube. This can be a serious infection.
- no urine for several hours, or a full, painful bladder you can't empty

Learn more: Kidney Foundation of Canada, kidney.ca.

General information only. This sheet doesn't replace advice from your own health care team. In an emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.

Dr. Shemer Ratner, Nephrology, Sudbury, Ontario. Last updated October 2026.