

KIDNEY disease is often described as a silent condition because symptoms tend to appear only after significant damage has occurred. By the time it is detected, some patients may already require dialysis or intensive treatment. This makes early screening and awareness especially important, as they allow for earlier intervention before complications develop.

Growing health concern in Malaysia

Chronic kidney disease is becoming an increasingly serious public health issue in Malaysia. According to the National Kidney Foundation, one in 10 adults is affected. Over time, the numbers have risen steadily. Data from the National Health and Morbidity Survey shows that prevalence increased from 9.1% in 2011 to 15.5% in 2018. Cases of end-stage kidney disease, where the kidneys can no longer function adequately, have also grown. Thousands of new patients require dialysis each year, with projections indicating a continued rise if current trends persist. This places significant strain on healthcare resources and long-term costs.

A major driver behind this increase is the country's rising burden of non-communicable diseases. Diabetes, in particular, plays a central role, accounting for about 65% of new end-stage kidney disease cases in Malaysia.

More than just kidneys

Kidney disease rarely exists on its own. It is closely linked to a group of interconnected conditions known as cardio-renal-metabolic diseases, which include diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and obesity. These conditions influence one another. Diabetes can damage the kidneys over time. As kidney function declines, controlling blood pressure becomes more difficult. Elevated blood pressure then further damages kidney tissue while placing additional strain on the heart.

What may begin as a single condition can gradually develop into a cycle affecting multiple systems in the body. Protecting kidney health early can therefore support overall health, including heart function and metabolic balance. Globally, kidney disease is also gaining recognition as a major health challenge. The World Health Organisation identifies it as one of the fastest rising causes of mortality, with projections suggesting it could become the fifth leading cause of death by 2050.



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Why kidney health matters

➤ Early screening for disease can protect long-term health, multiple systems in body

Why early action matters

Early detection offers one key advantage: Time. Identifying kidney disease in its early stages allows for interventions that can slow progression. These may include medication, lifestyle adjustments and regular monitoring. Delaying progression is important because advanced treatments such as dialysis, while life-saving, can significantly affect daily life. Regular sessions, often several times a week, can disrupt work, family routines and overall independence. By managing kidney health earlier, individuals are more likely to maintain their usual routines for

longer. It also reduces the risk of complications linked to other conditions within the cardio-renal-metabolic network. Beyond physical health, early management can also ease emotional strain. Chronic illness often brings uncertainty for patients and caregivers. Reducing complications and hospital visits can help create a greater sense of stability and control.

Environmental cost of late-stage care

While the personal impact of kidney disease is widely recognised, its environmental footprint is less often

discussed. Advanced treatments, particularly dialysis, require significant resources. Each session uses large amounts of purified water, electricity and single-use medical supplies. Over time, this contributes to substantial energy consumption and medical waste. Hospital-based care also relies heavily on disposable equipment and generates biohazard waste. When kidney disease is detected earlier and managed effectively, the need for these resource-intensive treatments can be reduced. This highlights a growing perspective in healthcare. Preventive care is not only beneficial for individuals, but also supports more sustainable systems.

Making screening more accessible

Despite the increasing prevalence of chronic kidney disease, awareness and screening rates remain relatively low. Many individuals are diagnosed only at later stages because the condition develops without clear warning signs. Early screening plays a crucial role in addressing this gap. Simple tests can detect kidney issues before symptoms appear, allowing for timely management and reducing the risk of complications. Accessibility is also improving. Community retail pharmacies are

becoming convenient points for basic health checks, offering an easier alternative to hospital visits. These locations provide an opportunity for individuals to monitor their health more regularly without long waiting times.

Simple step with lasting impact

Kidney disease may develop quietly, but its effects can be significant. Because it is closely linked to conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, monitoring kidney health is an important part of overall well-being. Individuals over 40, as well as those living with chronic conditions or with a family history of kidney disease, are encouraged to undergo regular screening. The process does not have to be complicated. Many local pharmacies now offer accessible screening options, making it easier to take that first step. In many cases, early detection can make a meaningful difference. A simple check today can help protect long-term health, reduce future risks and support a better quality of life.

This article is contributed by consultant nephrologist and internal medicine physician Dr Albert Hing Wong.