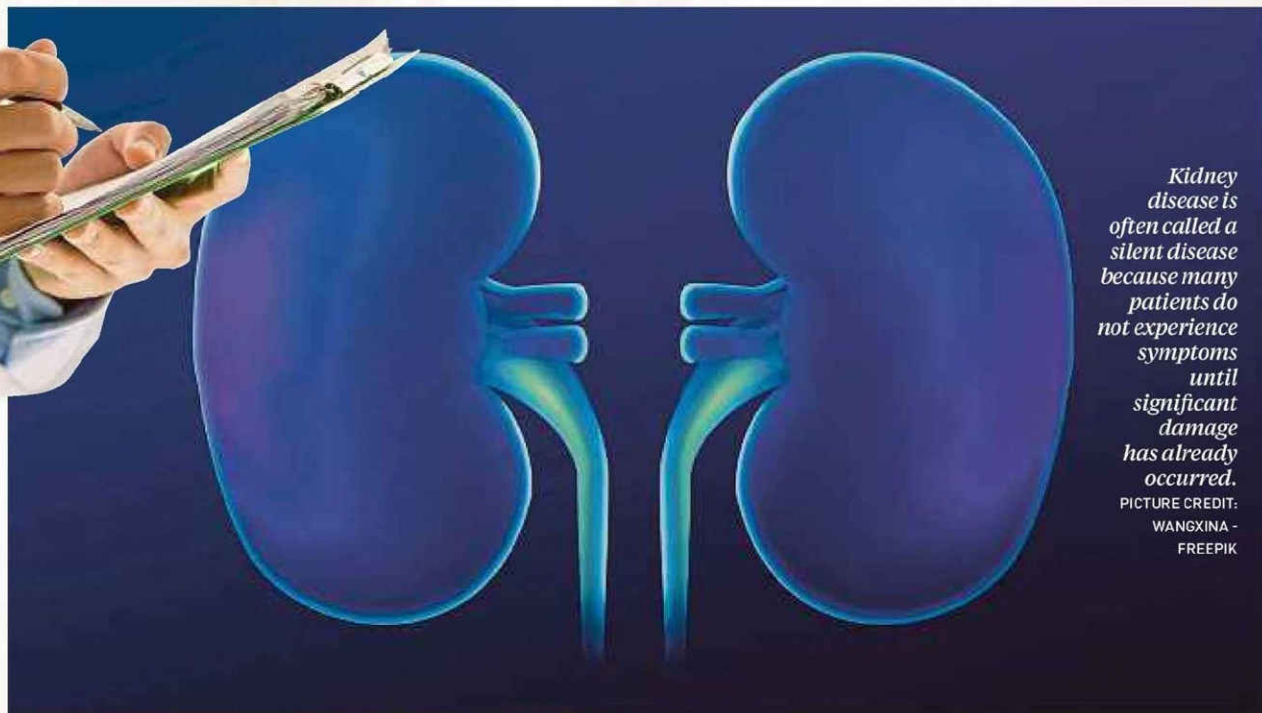


Chronic kidney disease: silent but deadly



A simple screening today could help detect kidney problems early, protect your heart and metabolic health and reduce the risk of serious complications later. PICTURE CREDIT: JCOMP - FREEPIK

Kidney disease is often called a silent disease because many patients do not experience symptoms until significant damage has already occurred.

PICTURE CREDIT: WANGXINA - FREEPIK

Heal

By Meera Murugesan

CHRONICKidney disease (CKD) is becoming one of Malaysia's most pressing public health challenges, yet it often develops quietly and goes unnoticed until it reaches an advanced stage.

According to the National Kidney Foundation (NKF), one in 10 adults suffers from CKD.

Data from the Health Ministry indicates that there are more than 10,000 new patients starting dialysis each year. In 2023, about 50,000 patients with end-stage kidney disease underwent chronic dialysis. This figure is expected to double by 2040.

Globally, this challenge is equally significant. The World Health Organisation identifies kidney disease as an escalating global health crisis, noting it is among the world's fastest-rising causes of mortality and is on track to rank as the fifth leading cause of death by 2050.

Once a person's kidneys have failed, dialysis is the only option until a transplant becomes available. Up to January this year, NKF dialysis centres were overseeing a network of 32 facilities, supporting 1,788 patients in managing their dialysis treatment.

Much of this rise is driven by Malaysia's growing burden of non-communicable diseases, particularly diabetes, says consultant nephrologist and internal medicine physician Dr Albert Hing.

CHAIN REACTION

Kidney disease rarely develops in isolation. It sits at the centre of a complex network of conditions known as cardio-renal-metabolic (CRM) diseases, which include diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and obesity, he explains.

These conditions are deeply interconnected. For instance, diabetes can damage the kidneys over time. As kidney function declines, blood pressure becomes harder to control. High blood pressure then further damages kidney tissue and places additional strain on the heart.

"What begins as one condition often becomes a chain reaction," says Dr Hing.

Kidney disease is often called a silent disease because many patients do not experience symptoms until significant damage has already occurred.

By the time it is detected, some patients may already require dialysis or other intensive treatment.

This is why early screening and greater public awareness are so important, as they allow kidney problems to be identified earlier and intervention to take place before complications develop, stresses Dr Hing.

When kidney disease is identified early, particularly among people with diabetes or hypertension, healthcare professionals can introduce treatments that help slow disease progression. These include medication, lifestyle changes and regular monitoring.

"Dialysis is life-saving, but it requires regular treatment sessions, often several times a week. These sessions can significantly affect daily routines, work schedules and family life," says Dr Hing.

Delaying dialysis allows patients to maintain independence for longer, continuing their careers, caring for loved ones and enjoying everyday activities.

Because CKD is part of the wider cardio-renal-metabolic network, managing kidney health early also helps prevent complications in other parts of the body. Healthy kidneys help regulate blood pressure, reduce strain on the heart and support metabolic balance.

"In other words, early action can help break the cycle of CRM diseases before complications escalate," says Dr Hing.

There is also an important emotional dimension, he says.

Chronic illnesses often create anxiety and uncertainty for both patients and caregivers. Preventing complications and reducing hospital visits can help patients maintain confidence, stability and control over their health journey.

Despite the growing burden of CKD in Malaysia, awareness and screening remain low, with many people only diagnosed at later stages because the disease develops silently.

Early screening is essential, as simple tests can detect kidney damage before symptoms appear, enabling timely treatment to slow disease progression and reduce related cardio-renal-metabolic complications.

For many Malaysians, scheduling a hospital visit for routine screening can feel time-consuming, but community retail pharmacies can help bridge this gap, says Dr Hing.

Retail pharmacies are among the most accessible healthcare touchpoints in neighbourhoods across the country, he adds.

They provide convenient locations where people can take proactive steps towards monitoring their health without long waiting times.

By offering screening services closer to where people live and work, pharmacies can help detect kidney disease earlier, before it progresses into a medical crisis.

CALL TO ACTION

Kidney disease may develop silently, but the consequences can be life-changing. Because CKD is closely connected to diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, monitoring kidney health is an important step in protecting overall cardio-renal-metabolic health.

"If you are over the age of 40, living with diabetes or high blood pressure or have a family history of kidney disease, regular health screenings are strongly recommended," says Dr Hing.

A simple screening today could help detect kidney problems early, protect your heart and metabolic health and reduce the risk of serious complications later.

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PICTURE CREDIT: DR ALBERT HING

