

## **Local and state kidney disease numbers rising; About 1,000 patients on dialysis in Caddo and surrounding parishes.**

By James Ramage  
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Leon Samuels lost his right kidney several years ago after doctors removed it to prevent an inoperable tumor on it from spreading. A few years after that, his remaining kidney got increasingly weaker.

For the past 2½ years, the 51-year-old has been spending four hours a day, three days a week on dialysis, where a machine filters and removes more than four quarts, or around 10 pounds, of waste and excess fluids from his body each visit because his remaining kidney no longer can.

"I'm just thankful it didn't happen to me earlier," Samuels said. "Just think, some years ago, (dialysis) wasn't even an option."

The Shreveport resident is one of a growing number of people in the area diagnosed with end stage renal disease, or kidney failure, according to nephrologist Dr. Michael Rokaw. He estimates that 1,000 patients are on dialysis in Caddo and surrounding parishes -- a figure his practice alone sees growing by 20 patients a month, and about 4 percent each year statewide.

Rokaw and Gwen Blackbourne Austin, director of nursing at the North Shreveport Dialysis clinic, said the disease is such a growing local and national problem that they're pushing for more awareness of it, as well as support for a related bill pending before the House Subcommittee on Health.

U.S. Rep. Dave Camp, R-Mich., authored the Kidney Care Quality and Improvement Act to increase Medicare reimbursements for kidney disease patients, which have not risen in real terms for more than 20 years and threaten the operation and proliferation of such dialysis facilities as North Shreveport Dialysis, according to Kidney Care Partners, a Washington, D.C.-based lobbying group.

North Shreveport Dialysis opened in 1990 with 14 machines, Austin said. The facility, which is always full, grew to 20 machines in 1995 and is looking to add eight more later this year, she said.

With 395 for every one million residents at risk for developing kidney disease, Louisiana ranks as one of the highest in the country, according to the United States Renal Data System's 2003 figures. The state also has the highest kidney disease incident and first-year death rates in the United States.

High blood pressure, adult onset diabetes and obesity are risk factors directly related to the disease, Rokaw said. Because of this, and the disease's increasing prevalence, he thinks doctors should be monitoring patients' kidney function as they would their blood pressure and cholesterol.

"A minor amount of kidney disease doubles your risk for a stroke or heart attack," Rokaw said. "And the worse the kidneys function, the higher the risk for cardiovascular disease. It's almost linear."

But for Samuels, who shows none of the risks, the disease runs in his family -- in men on his father's side, to be more specific.

Three years ago, doctors diagnosed his father, 78-year-old William Samuels, with the disease. And it's played a role in a brother's death in 1999, and has forced a cousin on his father's side into dialysis for 20 years, Leon Samuels added.

On a recent weekday morning, father and son were on dialysis together at the clinic. The younger Samuels sat with his left arm extended as blood-red tubes sprouted from an artery and vein and connected to a dialysis machine.

Leon Samuels said he's on a list to get a new kidney, and will remain on dialysis until he can get one, Austin said. "With me, the day after (dialysis) is always my best day. I feel normal," Leon Samuels said.