

UMDNJ doctor cites effects of lifestyle on kidney health African-Americans' high risk is highlighted

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Imagine spending four hours, three days a week on a recliner with tubes leading from a forearm into a machine as blood is pumped out your body for filtering and then returned.

Even the TV remote by your other arm that controls an overhead monitor fails to relieve the tedium, as you count with each beep of the dialysis machine other things you could be doing were your kidneys still healthy.

Amid National Minority Health Month, a UMDNJ doctor warned yesterday that early lifestyles determine the quality of one's health in later years. He noted that 32 percent of Americans who suffer from kidney failure are African-Americans.

Physician Stuart Baskin said frequent fast-food or high-fat, high-calorie meals, as well as alcohol, tobacco or drug abuse, contribute to the hypertension and diabetes that has led to 400,000 Americans suffering from kidney disease.

He said unless Americans exercise regularly, eat more salads and vegetables and avoid high-sodium foods and risky behavior, there will be 500,000 people with the disease by 2010, overwhelming dialysis centers and the health care system.

Baskin stressed that even with the most sophisticated dialysis machines, modern medicine is only able to allow patients to survive with the disease.

"We make it good enough to keep patients alive," he said of cleaning the blood and removing urine and other bodily fluids. "We cannot approximate the function of healthy kidneys."

Even so, the treatments are costly, at \$260 each. Those fees typically are borne not by the patients, but Medicare, Medicaid or commercial insurers.

Baskin is medical director at the Ruth Kilman Memorial Dialysis Center in Union Township. There Belinda Reddick, 36, of Newark is hooked up to a machine three times a week.

"Time is the worst thing," Reddick, a chef at Catholic Community Services in Newark, said of the thrice-weekly treatments she has been scheduling around work hours for nearly a year.

The mother of five children, the youngest of which is 6, added the need for dialysis precipitated by her last pregnancy has been "a big change in life."

Reddick admitted sometimes she is forced to skip a treatment, a potentially life-threatening move, said Baskin and officials at the dialysis center.

Baskin said Reddick is an example of a dialysis case that might have been prevented.

"When she was pregnant with her 6-year-old, I took a kidney biopsy," he said of care rendered before the patient required dialysis. "This was predictable and could have been forestalled, but she didn't allow me to control her blood pressure."

The doctor said developing high-blood pressure can be averted through aerobic exercise, a low-sodium diet and avoiding certain foods. He recommended the DASH eating plan, which includes foods low in saturated fat and cholesterol and emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, fish and poultry.

The dialysis center has a client list that ranges from 95 to 18 -- the earliest age at which it accepts patients.

"There are a lot of young patients because of HIV, hypertension, drug abuse and other lifestyle factors," said Baskin, who listed cocaine, alcohol and tobacco as well as high-sodium foods as risks.

Clara Sasak, regional vice president of national renal care company Fresenius, and William Brookins, its area manager, gave Rep. Mike Ferguson (R-Somerset) a tour of the facility amid treatments.

After viewing the dialysis procedure and chatting with Reddick, Ferguson said, "We need to focus on making people more aware of the health care they consume, and its costs.

"The biggest domestic challenge we face may be health care," he added. "We have to keep quality care at a cost we can afford. Preventive care is how we have to go."

Linda Stender, Ferguson's opponent in the autumn 7th Congressional District race, seized the opportunity to raise a major issue of her campaign. "It sounds like Mike Ferguson's health care plan is simple: Don't get sick," she said. "The leading cause of kidney disease is diabetes. If Mike Ferguson really cared about helping people with kidney disease, he would support embryonic stem cell research, which could help find a cure for diabetes. But Ferguson continues to oppose embryonic stem cell research, and continues to ignore the families that suffer from diseases that could be cured by this research."

Upon arrival at the center the congressman noted his visit coincided with National Kidney Month, which surprised Sasak and Brookins. "We should know, we're kidney people," they said later.

Actually Ferguson was just a tad off. That observance was last month.

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