

# CKD Conversation Starter

A guide to help clinicians navigate a potentially difficult conversation with patients who have a new or progressing CKD diagnosis.

## General considerations for “Connecting” with patients to ensure understanding and build a therapeutic environment

- Be aware of the language you use: tailor your words to the patient’s vocabulary.
- Slow down. Be aware of body language, and ensure that you are not “rushing” through the conversation. Do not assume that a head nod equals understanding. Prompt the patient to teach back to you.
- Remember, do not overload the patient with information; it may take more than one session to educate them completely. Tailor your conversation for the exact situation depending on the patient’s degree of kidney failure.
- If patients respond with a “no” or lack of understanding, be prepared to explain further.
- Techniques for delivering bad news well: ABCDE<sup>1,2</sup> can be found after the sample questions. ABCDE<sup>1,2</sup> was created for delivering a cancer diagnosis, but the basics are useful in delivering any type of bad news to a patient.

## Sample questions/comments written in plain language

### When first discussing a diagnosis of CKD (pre-testing)

- Can we talk about how your kidneys affect your health?
- Have any of your family members had problems with their kidneys?
- Let’s spend a few minutes discussing how well your kidneys are working.
- Do you know what the kidneys do in the body? If so, what do they do?
- We can check how well your kidneys are functioning a few ways. Do you know what those tests are?

### When discussing CKD screening & staging test results

- Do you understand your kidney function test results?
- Can I help you learn why these numbers are important?
- Do you understand what these numbers tell us about how your kidneys are working?
- Kidney damage is categorized in stages. Let’s discuss where you are at.
- Do you want information that you can take home with you on your results and stages of kidney function?

### When discussing CKD, progression of CKD, and kidney failure

- Did you know that your kidneys are not working at 100%?
- Do you want to talk about the symptoms of decreased kidney function?
- Can we talk about the complications of having decreased kidney function?
- Decreased kidney function **will** get worse. Did you know you may be able to slow the progression of your decreased kidney function? Decreased kidney function is known as chronic kidney disease or CKD. It is important you know that you have this disease and make sure all your healthcare providers are aware that you have it. Use the terms “chronic kidney disease” or “CKD” to make sure that your healthcare providers understand exactly what your disease is; and include your stage when telling them.

### When assessing a patient’s engagement in their care

- How do you think CKD will affect your everyday life?
- Based on your stage of CKD (remind patient of stage), do you know what to expect for your future treatment?
- Do you think you can follow the treatment plan?
- Do you feel you will need assistance in your CKD care?
- Do you have a support system to help you manage appointments, diet, and your medications?
- Check out mobile apps such as *Kidney Choices* to help you manage labs, appointments, and medications.
- Do you have any questions? You can reach me via: (another scheduled visit/phone/e-mail) and we can discuss more.
- Are you interested in information to take home on best ways to live with CKD?

### When discussing CKD/ESRD treatment options

- There are treatment options based on your CKD stage. Do you want more information about these options to take home?
- It can be difficult living with CKD, do you want to take a few minutes to talk about it?
- Have you thought about your treatment options? Using the *Kidney Choices* mobile app can help you navigate your options.
- Do you want me to explain the different treatment options?
- Let’s look at your current kidney function and talk about possible treatment plans.

*Continued*

## ABCDE<sup>1,2</sup>

### Advance preparation

- Ask what the patient already knows and understands.  
What is his or her coping style?
- Arrange for the presence of a support person and appropriate family.
- Arrange a time and place that will be undisturbed (hand off beeper).
- Prepare emotionally.
- Decide which words and phrases to use (write down a script).
- Practice delivering the news.

### Build a therapeutic environment/relationship

- Arrange a private, quiet place without interruptions.
- Provide adequate seating for all.
- Sit close enough to touch if appropriate.
- Reassure about pain, suffering, abandonment.

### Communicate well

- Be direct (“I am sorry, I have bad news”).
- Do not use euphemisms, jargon, acronyms.
- Say “cancer” or “death.”
- Allow for silence.
- Use touch appropriately.
- Ask patient to repeat his or her understanding of the news.
- Arrange additional meetings.
- Use repetition and written explanations or reminders.

### Deal with patient and family reactions

- Assess patient reaction
  - physiologic responses: flight/fight, conservation/withdrawal
  - cognitive coping strategies: denial, blame, intellectualization, disbelief, acceptance
  - affective responses: anger/rage, fear/terror, anxiety, helplessness, hopelessness, shame, relief, guilt, sadness, anticipatory grief.

- Listen actively, explore feelings, express empathy.

### Encourage and validate emotions (reflect back emotions)

- Correct distortions.
- Offer to tell others on behalf of the patient.
- Evaluate the effects of the news.
- Explore what the news means to the patient.
- Address further needs, determine the patient’s immediate and near-term plans, assess suicidality.
- Make appropriate referrals for more support.
- Provide written materials.
- Arrange follow-up.
- Process your own feelings.

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## Healthcare Professionals Resources

**National Kidney Foundation:** <https://www.kidney.org/professionals>

**End Stage Renal Disease National Coordinating Center (ESRD NCC):** <https://esrdncc.org/en/resources>

**National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases:**  
<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/communication-programs/nkdep/identify-manage-patients>

### For use with patients:

- Reviewing kidney test results:  
<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/professionals/clinical-tools-patient-education-outreach/explain-kidney-test-results>

## Patient-Friendly Resources

**National Kidney Disease Education Program (NKDEP):** <https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/kidney-disease>

- Talk with your family: <https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/communication-programs/nkdep/get-involved/talk-family>
- Talk with your faith community:  
<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/communication-programs/nkdep/get-involved/talk-faith-community>

**End Stage Renal Disease National Coordinating Center (ESRD NCC):** <https://esrdncc.org/en/resources>

**National Kidney Foundation:** <https://www.kidney.org/atoz/content/about-chronic-kidney-disease>

- NKF Patient Resources: <https://www.kidney.org/patients>

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1. Rabow MW, McPhee SJ. Beyond breaking bad news: how to help patients that suffer. *West J Med* 1999;171:261.  
2. VandeKieft GK. Breaking bad news. *Am Fam Physician*. 2001 Dec 15;64(12):1975-8.