

<http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare>

Red undies under the radar

It's a challenge for any community group or organisation to raise awareness of their special needs. This is particularly so in the field of health and medicine. Kidney Health Australia has approached this challenge from a somewhat different perspective; by highlighting the colour of our underwear. To draw our collective attention to our kidneys, last week was designated *Red Undies Week*.

Generally, underwear is not as immediately obvious as some other articles of clothing; but neither is kidney disease usually foremost in our mind. As the Kidney Health website says it's time to give some decent exposure to chronic kidney disease (CKD), a disease which has flown under the radar for far too long – just like our undies??

In any event, we can't over estimate the importance of our kidneys and the significance of kidney disease. One in three adults is at increased risk of developing CKD.

The kidneys are two small fist-sized, bean-shaped organs situated on the lower back of the abdomen. Small they may be, but they do an enormous job. In fact, one functioning kidney is essential for life.

If the lungs are our air-conditioning unit, then the kidneys are our body's washing machine and waste disposal system. They're also a superbly effective filter system with about 200 litres of blood passing through 2 million tiny filters every day; resulting in the removal of about 2 litres of waste products and unneeded water.

As well as enabling us to excrete certain unwanted and toxic substances, the kidneys produce hormones and regulate water levels and blood pressure.

Of course, properly regulated blood pressure is critical for good health. While there are no firm and fast rules about what constitutes a normal blood pressure reading – blood pressure varies from person to person and with individuals from time to time – a confirmed reading of greater than 140/90 is considered sufficiently high to require treatment.

There is a close relationship between high blood pressure and kidney disease: high blood pressure can cause kidney damage and kidney damage can cause high blood pressure.

Uncontrolled blood glucose levels (ie:diabetes) is another major risk factor for CKD. Around half of all people with diabetes develop kidney damage; so it's important for people with diabetes to have regular kidney function tests.

With diabetes, all the small blood vessels in the body are damaged; and those in the kidneys are especially vulnerable. The blood cleaning activity of the kidneys does not operate effectively; the body retains more salt and water than it should, leading to swelling of the ankles and weight gain.

Being overweight or obese are in themselves risk factors for kidney disease. As well as increasing the likelihood of both blood pressure and diabetes (and therefore increasing the risk of CKD), as we get bigger and more overweight, the kidneys have to cope with a greater workload.

Being overweight is a very visible characteristic, but having high blood pressure and diabetes can often go unnoticed until the CKD is well established and difficult to treat. So a regular visit to the doctor is essential. The kidney health check involves a blood pressure test, a urine test for protein and blood test for a substance called creatinine.

Prevention strategies (and often initial treatment as well) involves dietary and lifestyle changes – losing weight, cutting down on alcohol intake, exercising regularly, consuming less salt and stopping smoking. If medication is necessary it may involve life-long treatment.

You can get more information about diabetes and high blood pressure and their relationship to kidney disease from pharmacies throughout Australia providing Self Care health information. For the nearest location phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 722 or check the website www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder. You'll have to bring your own red undies.