

# Feline Kidney Disease: Understanding Chronic Kidney Disease in Cats

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is one of the most common health problems affecting older cats. The kidneys play a vital role in filtering waste products from the blood, maintaining hydration, and balancing important minerals in the body. When the kidneys begin to lose function, waste products start to build up, leading to illness.

While CKD can't usually be cured, it can be **managed effectively**—helping your cat live a longer, more comfortable life.

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## What Do the Kidneys Do?

The kidneys act as the body's filtration system. They:

- Remove waste and toxins from the blood
- Regulate water, salt, and mineral balance
- Help control blood pressure
- Produce hormones that stimulate red blood cell production

When the kidneys start to fail, these functions are compromised.

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## Signs of Kidney Disease in Cats

Early signs of CKD can be subtle and may develop gradually. Common signs include:

- Increased thirst and urination
- Weight loss
- Poor appetite
- Vomiting or nausea

- Lethargy or weakness
- Bad breath (sometimes with a “uremic” or ammonia-like odor)
- Dull or unkempt coat

If you notice these symptoms, it's important to have your cat examined by your veterinarian.

## How Is Kidney Disease Diagnosed?

Diagnosis involves a **combination of blood and urine tests**, along with your cat's history and physical exam findings.

Your veterinarian will typically measure:

- **Blood urea nitrogen (BUN)** and **creatinine** – waste products that rise as kidney function declines
- **SDMA (symmetric dimethylarginine)** – an early indicator of kidney disease
- **Urine specific gravity (USG)** – to assess how well the kidneys are concentrating urine
- **Protein in the urine (proteinuria)** – can indicate kidney damage
- **Blood pressure** – high blood pressure is common in cats with CKD

## Understanding IRIS Staging

The **International Renal Interest Society (IRIS)** created a system to help veterinarians stage kidney disease. Staging helps guide treatment and monitor progression.

Stage	Description	Typical Creatinine (µmol/L)	SDMA (µg/dL)	What It Means
<b>Stage 1</b>	Early or at-risk	<140	<18	Blood values are normal, but other signs (like dilute urine or high SDMA) suggest early kidney changes.

<b>Stage 2</b>	Mild CKD	140–250	18–25	Mild loss of kidney function; cats often appear healthy but may drink and urinate more.
<b>Stage 3</b>	Moderate CKD	251–440	26–38	Moderate loss of kidney function; signs like weight loss, vomiting, or poor appetite may appear.
<b>Stage 4</b>	Severe CKD	>440	>38	Advanced disease with significant kidney failure; supportive and palliative care become most important.

Your vet may also **substage** based on:

- **Protein in urine (proteinuria)**
- **Blood pressure (hypertension)**

These factors help determine the best treatment and monitoring plan.

## Treatment and Management

While CKD isn't curable, **early detection and good management** can make a big difference. Treatment may include:

- **Prescription kidney diets** – specially formulated to reduce waste buildup and support kidney function
- **Maintaining hydration** – encouraging water intake or giving subcutaneous fluids at home
- **Medications** – to control blood pressure, nausea, or phosphorus levels
- **Monitoring** – regular rechecks to track kidney values and adjust care as needed

Each cat's treatment plan is tailored to their stage and individual needs.

## Living With a Cat With Kidney Disease

Many cats with CKD live for years with proper care. You can help by:

- Feeding the recommended diet
- Providing plenty of fresh water
- Giving medications as prescribed
- Scheduling regular check-ups and lab work

Your veterinary team will guide you through every step, ensuring your cat stays as healthy and comfortable as possible.

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Chronic kidney disease is common in older cats but **manageable** with early detection and proactive care. Understanding the disease and the IRIS staging system helps pet owners and veterinarians work together to provide the best possible quality of life for affected cats.