

Understanding the Kidney Transplant Evaluation Process: What to Expect

Andrew Kowalski, MD, FASN

A kidney transplant can be a life-changing procedure for individuals with end-stage kidney disease, offering the possibility of a longer, healthier life. However, before a transplant can take place, patients must go through a comprehensive evaluation process to determine if they are suitable candidates. This evaluation ensures that the transplant will be as safe and successful as possible. There are many steps within the process, but they can be summarized into 7 basic categories.

If you or a loved one are considering a kidney transplant, understanding the steps involved in the evaluation process can help you prepare.

Health Disorders That May Require Kidney Transplantation

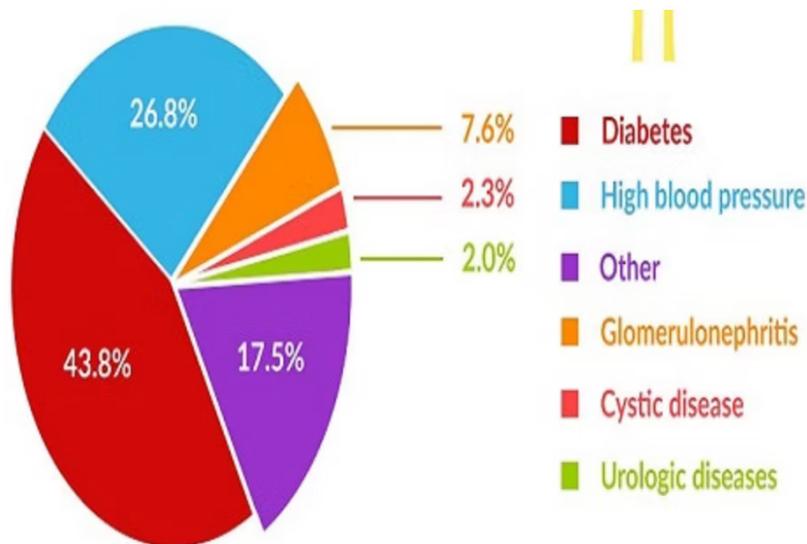


Image from: <https://www.vaidam.com/knowledge-center/kidney/kidney-transplant-an-overview>

Step 1: Referral and Initial Assessment

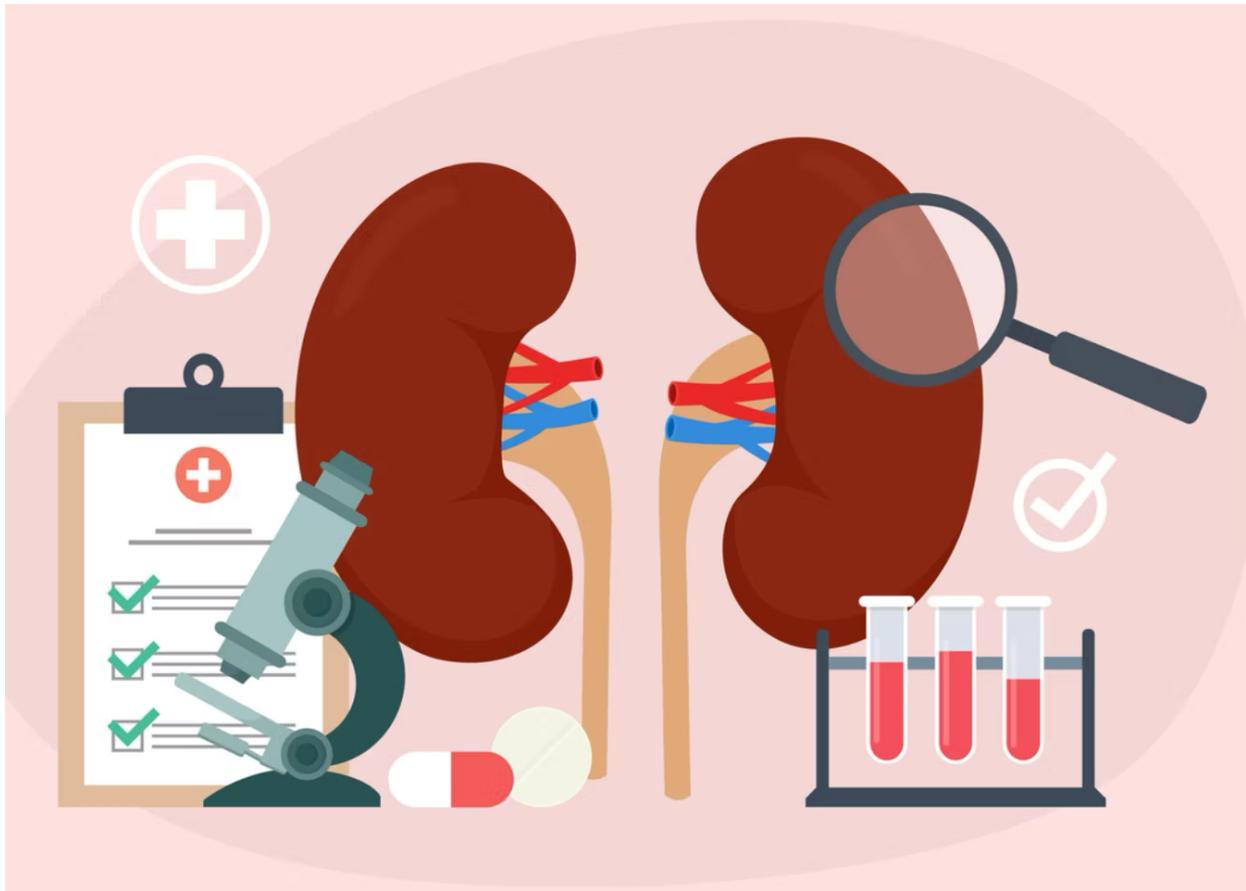
The kidney transplant evaluation process begins with a referral from your nephrologist (kidney specialist). Once referred, you'll undergo an initial assessment, which includes:

- **Medical History Review:** A transplant team will review your medical history to check for conditions that may impact the success of a transplant.
- **Physical Examination:** A thorough physical exam helps assess your overall health.
- **Blood Tests:** These tests help determine your blood type and check for infections, liver function, and potential complications.
- **Imaging Tests:** X-rays, ultrasounds, and other imaging scans evaluate the condition of your kidneys and other vital organs.

Step 2: Compatibility Testing

Matching a kidney donor with a recipient is critical for transplant success. Tests performed include:

- **Blood Type Compatibility:** The recipient's and donor's blood types must be compatible or require a special procedure to overcome incompatibility. Fortunately these days 100% blood type compatibility is not always necessary to qualify as a potential match, although it does make the transplant process easier by decreasing the amount of medications that need to be taken to protect the organ.
- **HLA (Human Leukocyte Antigen) Typing:** This test identifies genetic markers to find a donor match. HLA antibodies are immune proteins that target HLA molecules, which are proteins that come in several different forms and are expressed on the surface of most cells. These antibodies can be formed in response to exposure to foreign HLA antigens through events such as blood transfusions, organ transplants, or pregnancy. HLA antibodies play a significant role in transplant immunology, where they can lead to graft (kidney or whichever organ is being transplanted) rejection by recognizing and binding to donor HLA antigens, thereby activating immune responses that damage the transplanted organ (which is why there is a strong push to continue to take the specific transplant medications, these medications tone down the immune system and prevent these responses). The detection and characterization of HLA antibodies are crucial for assessing immunological risk and managing transplant recipients to prevent antibody-mediated rejection.
- **Crossmatch Testing:** A small sample of the recipient's blood is mixed with the donor's to check for immune system reactions. A negative crossmatch indicates better compatibility.



Step 3: Psychological and Social Evaluation

A kidney transplant is not just a physical procedure—it also requires emotional and mental preparedness. The transplant team will assess:

- **Mental Health Readiness**: Patients must demonstrate emotional stability and the ability to manage post-transplant medications and follow-up care. The transplant process is a big deal and can be overwhelming for many reasons. Careful evaluation of the patient, their readiness and their ability to take control of their own health needs to be assessed.
- **Social Support System**: A strong support system of family, friends, or caregivers is crucial for post-transplant recovery. The transplant process is not a patient only process. "Kidneys are bad and now my treatment is to get a new one." Studies have shown that the support of friends, family and other loved ones increase the likelihood of a successful outcome of a better functioning transplant that will last for years.

- **Substance Use Screening:** Patients must be free from tobacco, alcohol, and drug dependencies that could interfere with transplant success. Not only can these substances lead to other health problems and can progress into destructive behavior, many of these compounds strongly interfere with the important medications that will be needed on a daily basis. Any negative interference with these medications will certainly shorten the life of the transplanted organ.

Step 4: Additional Health Screenings

Since a transplant places stress on the body, doctors must ensure patients are in the best possible health. Additional screenings may include:

- **Cardiac Evaluation:** Heart tests such as an EKG, echocardiogram, or stress test assess heart function.
- **Cancer Screening:** Routine screenings for cancer (e.g., mammogram, colonoscopy) ensure no underlying malignancies exist.
- **Infectious Disease Testing:** Tests for hepatitis, HIV, tuberculosis, and other infections help prevent complications. The transplant medications alter the patient's immune system and can make underlying diseases reappear and make them harder to treat. Additionally, care is taken not to give an infected organ to someone who has no underlying disease process.

Step 5: Financial and Insurance Review

Transplant procedures and medications can be costly, so financial coordinators help review insurance coverage and potential out-of-pocket expenses. They may also discuss assistance programs for those who need financial support.

Step 6: Multidisciplinary Team Meeting

After all evaluations are complete, the transplant team—which includes nephrologists, surgeons, psychologists, and social workers—will meet to discuss your case. They will determine:

- Whether you are a suitable transplant candidate
- If any additional tests or treatments are needed before listing
- If lifestyle changes (e.g., weight loss, smoking cessation) are required before proceeding

Step 7: Being Placed on the Transplant List

If you are approved for a kidney transplant, you will be placed on the national transplant waiting list managed by the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS). Your position on the list depends on factors such as blood type, tissue match, and urgency of need. Different states have different "waiting times" so becoming familiar with your states process is key. Fortunately, the wait times have decrease in recent years compairedto when I was in medical school and hopefully they will continue to improve. Additionally, there is no rule that a patient cannot be listed in more than one state. For example, patients in Illinois frequently get listed in Wisconsin, Iowa and indiana as well. Considering each state has different wait times this can increase you chances of getting a kidney sooner. Finally, if you have a living donor, your transplant may be scheduled sooner and may occur in under a year.

Preparing for the Next Steps

The kidney transplant evaluation process is thorough, but it is designed to maximize success and long-term health. Patients should stay proactive by maintaining good health, following their doctors' recommendations, and staying prepared for when a kidney becomes available.

If you or a loved one is considering a kidney transplant, talk to your doctor to begin the evaluation process. Visit the [National Kidney Foundation's website](#) to find out more information about donating. ith the right preparation and support, a kidney transplant can offer a new lease on life.