ABOUT KIDNEY DISEASE

- The kidneys are a pair of fist-sized organs located on either side of the spinal column that perform life-sustaining functions to keep the rest of the body in balance.

- Early kidney disease has few symptoms. As it worsens, many complications—such as high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis (thickening and hardening of the artery walls), anemia, weak bones, and nerve damage—can develop.

- Some forms of kidney failure are temporary and may get better. This is called acute kidney failure. Chronic or end-stage kidney failure is the result of a scarring process that leads to the shutdown of the kidneys.

- Chronic kidney failure does not get better. Veterans with chronic kidney failure need dialysis treatments (artificial replacement of kidney function) for the rest of their lives, or may receive a kidney transplant.

VA RESEARCH ON KIDNEY DISEASE: OVERVIEW

- In 2012, VA and the University of Michigan began creating a national kidney disease registry to monitor kidney disease among Veterans. This registry will provide information on kidney disease to Veterans, help identify those at risk for kidney disease, and improve access to care.

- Dr. Thomas E. Starzl conducted the first long-term successful kidney transplant in 1962 while on the staff of the Denver VA Medical Center.

- Research has found that rates of chronic kidney disease are higher among Veterans than in the general population. VA researchers are working on ways to diagnose chronic kidney disease earlier and more effectively treat it.

- VA researchers are studying the relationship between kidney disease and other diseases to find better therapies and drug treatments for the condition.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

1962 – Conducted the first long-term successful kidney transplant, by Dr. Thomas E. Starzl, a VA surgeon and researcher

1998 – Learned that if erythropoietin is injected under the skin instead of into a vein, smaller doses of the medication can be used

2008 – Determined that high-intensity renal-replacement therapy in critically ill patients with acute kidney injury is no better than less intensive therapy

2012 – Established, along with the University of Michigan, a National Kidney Disease Registry to monitor kidney disease among Veterans

2015 – Found that patients with chronic kidney disease were more likely to have vascular diseases, diabetes, hypertension, and cancer than those without the condition

RECENT STUDIES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

- Patients with chronic kidney disease are more likely to have other chronic diseases such as vascular disease, diabetes, and cancer. A study involving VA researchers in Richmond, Va., and Buffalo, N.Y., showed that Veterans have a higher rate of CKD than the general U.S. population, and those with CKD had much higher rates of other diseases, compared with other populations of kidney patients.

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VA researchers are working on ways to diagnose chronic kidney disease earlier and treat it more effectively.