

Glomerulonephritis Series

Immunoglobulin A Nephropathy

What is Immunoglobulin A Nephropathy (IgAN)?

IgAN is a disease of the filters of the kidneys. Your kidneys have 1 million filters that clean toxins (harmful substances) from your blood. These filters, called **glomeruli**, also prevent cells and protein from spilling out from your blood into the urine.

IgAN is a type of glomerulonephritis (GN), an inflammation in the filters in your kidneys. This is a rare condition that has an important impact on your kidney and overall health.

How is IgAN diagnosed?

A kidney biopsy is used to diagnose GN. This means a small sample of tissue is taken from your kidney. There are different types of GN. Your doctor will use a microscope to look at the patterns in your biopsy sample to understand what type you have.

When you have IgAN, the filters of both of your kidneys become blocked and inflamed with a protein called Immunoglobulin A (IgA).



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What causes IgAN?

The protein IgA is a normal part of a healthy immune system, protecting you against infections. Some people's immune systems make too much IgA, which can clog and cause damage to the kidney filters. The reason this happens is not known.

Rarely, IgAN can develop in people who have a bowel or liver disease, or a viral infection. Your doctor may do more tests to see if you have any conditions to help find a cause.

Signs and symptoms

The signs of IgAN are often silent and can only be seen using blood or urine tests. Once you have a diagnosis of IgAN, it is important to continue to have these tests to monitor your condition with your health care team.

Some signs may include:

High blood pressure (hypertension) – High blood pressure cannot be felt. It can only be found by measuring the blood pressure in your arm.

Protein in the urine (proteinuria) – High levels of protein create bubbles in the urine. This can be an early sign of GN. When too much protein spills into the urine, the level of protein in your blood is lowered. This can make you more likely to get infections or have other health issues.

Blood in the urine (hematuria) – Blood in the urine may be invisible, or it may make the urine look red.

High creatinine levels – Creatinine is a normal part of your blood. It is measured with a blood test. If your kidneys aren't cleaning your blood well, they will remove less creatinine from your urine, and more creatinine will appear in your blood. Creatinine levels tell us how well your kidneys are cleaning. Low creatinine levels in the blood mean healthier kidneys.

Treatment options

There are 2 types of treatments for people who have IgAN. Your doctor will work with you to decide what treatment will be best for you:

- **Option 1: Treatments that do not affect the immune system**

These treatments include medicines to control your blood pressure, manage your swelling, and lower your cholesterol. Quitting smoking and making healthy lifestyle choices are also important ways to protect your kidneys. Some research shows that fish oil supplements may also help.

- **Option 2: Immune system lowering treatment**

Medicines are used to lower the body's immune system response so that it doesn't make extra glomeruli-clogging IgA. These medicines can put you at risk of infections and have other side effects. They need to be carefully monitored to be sure you have the right dose.

Do certain foods cause GN?

Diet is not considered to be a cause of GN. Changing what you eat will not cure your condition. But, some changes in your food choices like eating foods with less salt, and other changes, can help your symptoms improve. Your treatment side effects may also improve. Ask your health care team for tips on healthy living.

What can I expect living with IgAN?

Every person may be affected differently by their IgAN. For some, IgAN is very mild, with little damage to the kidneys. Sometimes IgAN can permanently scar the kidneys, which causes them not to work as well (chronic kidney disease). Advanced scarring cause stop the kidney filters from working completely (kidney failure).

It is important to work with your care team and follow your condition with regular blood and urine tests. Since IgAN symptoms may not be noticeable to you, these tests are the only reliable way to monitor your condition.

Taking part in research studies

Many researchers are studying new treatments for IgAN. Some patients find it rewarding to join research studies, but this is voluntary. Ask your care team if you want to learn more about studies that are happening at your clinic that can help find a cure.

Visit www.uhnpatienteducation.ca for more health information.

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