

Don't roll this stone

Kidney stones are not worth the pain, doctors say

A veteran urologist, Uwais Zaid, MD, has heard the comparisons.

Pain from a kidney stone is like giving birth.

"It's true," says the man who provides care at [OSF HealthCare in Alton, Illinois](#).

"It's horrible. They just can't get comfortable. They're writhing around in pain," Dr. Zaid says of people suffering from a calcification-turned-blockage in the urinary tract.

"When the kidney gets obstructed, everything gets swollen upstream. That causes everything to get stretched out," Dr. Zaid explains. "And it hurts a lot. Your body responds with severe pain in the flank area. It's a sharp, stabbing pain."

Other signs: you suddenly start feeling an urgency to urinate or your urine is anything but clear or yellow.

All those unpleasant symptoms are why prevention of kidney stones is key. It starts with what you put in your body.

Drink plenty of water, Dr. Zaid says. Doctors even recognize a "kidney stone belt" in the southern United States where people deal with sweltering weather and dehydration.

Avoid excess salt and sugar in your diet. That means cut back on soda and sweet tea. Too much meat, nuts and leafy vegetables can also cause problems.

"Other risk factors include a family history of kidney stones. Chronic diarrhea can cause dehydration and a loss of electrolytes," Dr. Zaid says.

For small kidney stones – less than five millimeters across, or about the size of an eraser on the end of a pencil – a provider may see if the stones can pass out of your body through the urethra on their own. Medication can help with that.

But for trickier stones, there are several ways doctors can intervene. Dr. Zaid says providers can blast sound waves at the kidney stone from outside the body to break the stone apart. A doctor can send a camera through the urinary system, find the stone, use a laser to fragment it and remove the pieces. For larger stones – two to four centimeters – surgery involves an incision through your back to reach the stone, break it apart and remove it.

If you have symptoms of a kidney stone, don't try to tough it out. Your symptoms may subside, but there may still be issues that could turn serious. Instead, see a doctor right away. They will perform a CT scan or ultrasound to find the cause of the pain, then develop a treatment plan.

"If the kidney remains obstructed for several weeks, that can lead to kidney damage," Dr. Zaid warns. "If the kidney stone causes urine to get infected upstream, that can lead to [sepsis](#), which is a life-threatening infection."

Learn more about kidney stones on the [OSF HealthCare health library](#) and the [OSF HealthCare blog](#).