

Script – Print – Singing the blues over a kidney infection

Liam Payne is best known for his part in the boy band, One Direction. Now a solo artist, Payne made news recently for having to postpone his tour due to a serious kidney infection that landed the pop singer in the hospital.

A kidney infection occurs when bacteria get into your kidneys. It can affect one or both kidneys. Doctors say a kidney infection is a type of urinary tract infection (UTI).

“A UTI is essentially when bacteria make it to the urinary system,” says Maritza Estrada-O'Brien, MD, a primary care physician with OSF HealthCare. “Normally it starts from the outside world. It gets into the urethra and gets into the bladder. When it gets into the bladder, that’s when we categorize it as a urinary tract infection or UTI. The problem is the longer it sits there, the more likely it is to travel to other parts of the system. It travels up the tubes and can land in the kidneys – one, both, but once it gets to that point, it causes problems.”

The symptoms range in severity from vomiting to cloudy urine.

“When patients come to see me the biggest things that I look for are fever, chills, burning with urination or going to the bathroom more often, pressure down in the pelvis or even a dull ache in the back because that’s where the kidneys lie,” says Dr. Estrada-O’Brien. “But the biggest giveaways are the fever and chills, because that means this infection is more serious.”

Anyone can get a kidney infection, but those who are at the greatest risk are:

- People with kidney issues
- People with diabetes
- People undergoing cancer treatment
- Women, who have shorter urethras, which makes it easier for bacteria to enter the urinary tract.
- People who are immunocompromised

Dr. Estrada-O’Brien recommends drinking plenty of fluids to combat some of the symptoms. But if you’re not feeling better after a few days, it’s time to call your doctor.

“If it’s a simple UTI where it’s concentrated to the bladder and you don’t have any major symptoms, it’s antibiotics in the office,” she says. “But once it does get to this kidney infection level, or pyelonephritis, it normally requires hospitalization, IV antibiotics, fluids, and other supportive measures just to make sure that it gets truly treated in the kidneys themselves.”

The best way to prevent kidney infection is to drink plenty of water, urinate as soon as you feel the urge, and if you are a woman wipe from front to back after going to the bathroom to help prevent bacteria from reaching the urethra. If you’re a person who develops frequent UTIs, follow up with your physician sooner than later.

“The takeaway is all about early diagnosis,” says Dr. Estrada-O’Brien. “If you notice that something is off, see your primary care doctor. It’s easy enough to get a urine analysis and treat it early on before it has the chance to progress to a kidney infection. Stay well hydrated. It’s very important to keep on top of those underlying medical conditions like diabetes or other issues that could make you a higher risk for kidney infections.”