

# Strategies to prevent chronic kidney disease

By Courtney Nicholas

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Chicago jazz singer Felena Bunn was just 25 years old when she suffered a severe stroke caused by high blood pressure. Three years later she received the devastating news that her kidneys were failing. Now 35, Felena has been on costly dialysis for three years while waiting for a life-saving transplant.

She's just one of thousands in Chicago trying to cope with the enormous expense and daily ordeal of living with kidney failure. She must also live with the knowledge that there's no cure.

An estimated 31 million Americans suffer from chronic kidney disease. It is a health crisis that's taking a harsh toll on Chicago minorities, particularly African-Americans who live in "red zones," the neighborhoods most impacted by kidney disease.

The red zones are predominantly ZIP codes on Chicago's South and West sides. For example, according to the National Minority Quality Forum, between 45 and 55 percent of residents in ZIP code 60624 on the west side suffer from stage 2 chronic kidney disease, which indicates a decrease in kidney function. In 2008 the *Chicago Tribune* reported that some Chicago neighborhoods have kidney failure rates that are more than double the national average and three times higher than the rest of the city.

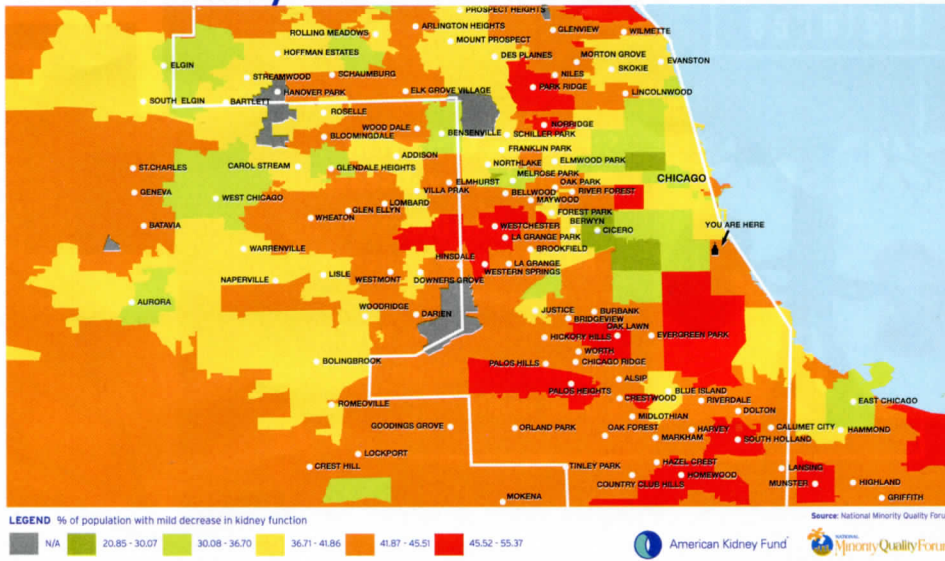
Why are minority neighborhoods impacted the most? Because it's in these communities that you'll find a disproportionate number of people with diabetes and high blood pressure, the leading causes of chronic kidney disease. You'll also find obesity, poverty, lack of access to medical care, and unaffordable health insurance—the root cause of many chronic medical ailments.

The health disparities gap must be addressed, and health care reform is the first step. The goal should be to assure that all Americans, including those with chronic illnesses, have access to high-quality, affordable health care.

Access to healthy foods is another crucial step toward erasing health disparities. Many of Chicago's poorest communities, red zones for chronic kidney disease, are also food deserts where fast food and fried foods can be found on every corner, yet grocery stores with inexpensive fruits and vegetables are nowhere in sight.

"I grew up in Auburn-Gresham, and I remember very well my mother traveling outside our neighborhood to find affordable, quality food," says Felena Bunn. "When I lived in Englewood I had no grocery stores to shop for nutritious food in my area. I had to travel miles away from

## Chronic Kidney Disease Red Zones



my home to find healthy choices. It was during this time that my health began to fail and I experienced problems with high blood pressure that caused my stroke."

According to Gallagher Research Group, more than 600,000 Chicagoans live in a food desert. The city's food deserts affect a population that is overwhelmingly African-American: about 478,000 blacks compared to some 78,000 whites and 57,000 Latinos.

Despite the big-picture problem of poverty and the disease paradigm it can create, even people who live in Chicago's red zones can take steps to ensure that they won't fall victim to kidney failure, which is most often caused by diabetes and high blood pressure. In many cases it's a preventable condition.

Early screening, along with prevention, can be a lifesaver. About 25 percent of people who are screened show signs of possible kidney damage; if it's caught early, many will never face the ordeal of costly dialysis and the nightmare of waiting for a transplant.

Earl Singleton learned much too late about his kidney disease. He's suffered from diabetes for 10 years, and in 2006 he went into the hospital for an amputation when doctors discovered his kidneys were failing. The Hyde Park resident and former teacher must undergo dialysis treatment at the hospital three times a week for four hours at a time.

The financial burden alone for people dealing with kidney disease can be devastating. Fortunately, Earl and many others have been able to turn to the American Kidney Fund (AKF) for financial support. Last year AKF provided nearly \$155 million in treatment-related financial assistance to more than 87,000 dialysis

patients nationwide. In Chicago more than 1,100 dialysis patients last year received nearly \$1.4 million in support from AKF for treatment expenses.

Its MIKE program (Minority Intervention and Kidney Education) provides free medical testing, including checks for kidney function, cholesterol levels, blood pressure, blood sugar, and other important health measures. Screenings take place at various locations around the city from March through November.

Over the last ten years the number of people living with kidney disease has increased by 25 percent. It's a silent condition at first, but you don't have to become a kidney-failure statistic—take steps to break free of the cycle by taking responsibility for your health and well-being.

For more information, please call 800-638-8299 or visit [kidneyfund.org](http://kidneyfund.org).

## Our Contributing Writers

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