

Ask a Nephrologist (and Psychologist!)

answers provided by **Dr. Jim Boudreau** and **Dr. Teri Boudreau**

1 I am thirsty most of the time and have difficulty following my daily fluid restriction. What can I do?

Nephrologist's answer: You can keep track of the volume of fluid that you are drinking by using a measuring cup to measure all fluids that you are ingesting. Sucking on frozen grapes or chewing gum also may help.

Psychologist's Ideas: Tracking fluids can be made easier by finding a system that is easy to access (e.g., calendar near where you eat, notes page on your phone, decorative journal that you enjoy using). Finding activities that you find pleasurable which are scheduled throughout the day can provide positive distractions until you are able to eat or drink a food or beverage.

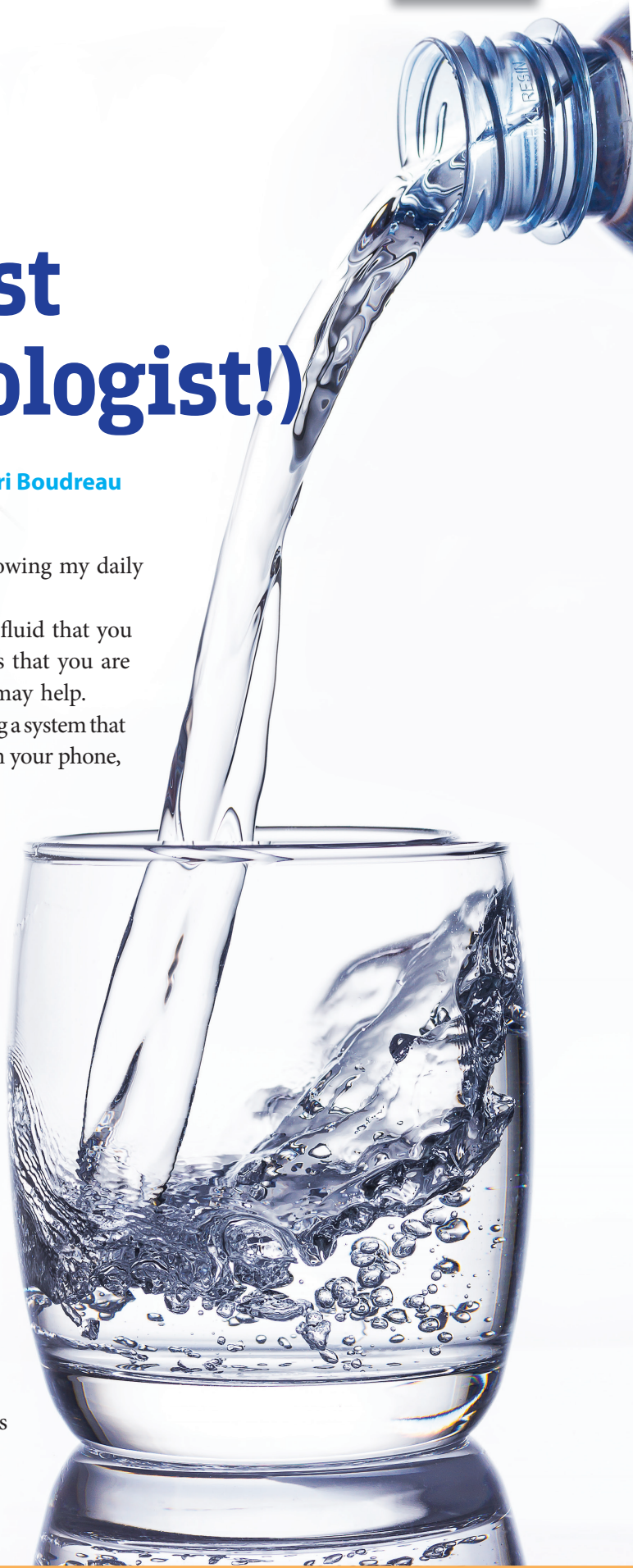
2 It is uncomfortable to sit in the dialysis recliner chair for four hours. Why can't my treatments be shortened?

Nephrologist's answer: Shortening your dialysis treatments will decrease their effectiveness: there will be incomplete removal of the waste products of metabolism. Fluid that needs to be removed will be left behind (and therefore will build up in your body). Long term, the duration of your life may be shortened.

Psychologist's Ideas: Getting to know the other dialysis patients can provide extra social support and shared enjoyment during an otherwise less than "fun" experience. Some dialysis patients find this is a good time to meditate, relax, and engage in certain hobbies. Reframing the negative thoughts into ones that focus on positive aspects of the experience can help improve both mood and attitude.

Negative thought: "Sitting in this dialysis chair so many days for such a long time is unpleasant."

Positive reframe: "Dialysis means improved health,



more active involvement in my life, positive interactions with other patients who may feel similarly to me, and an opportunity to use this time to reflect on all the positives in my life.”

3 Why do I have to take intestinal phosphorus binders? I like foods that contain phosphorus and do not feel any differently after I eat them.

Nephrologist’s answer: Through a series of steps, high blood phosphorus levels will cause calcification of your blood vessels and soft tissues, weaken your bones, and cause itching of your skin. Clinical studies have shown that elevated blood phosphorus levels, either by themselves or in association with high blood calcium levels, can increase mortality in dialysis patients.

Psychologist’s answer: Again, reframing the thought about why do I have to take intestinal binders into a positive thought about how fortunate we are that science allows us to take a medication that can allow us to eat some of the foods we enjoy while minimizing the negative consequences. Taking these binders allows us to more actively control our health rather than feel it is completely beyond our control.

4 Why are you recommending that I have an arteriovenous fistula (AVF) created? I do not like needles and would rather be connected to the dialysis machine using a catheter.

Nephrologist’s answer: Although it is convenient to receive your hemodialysis treatments via a catheter, your risk of experiencing a bloodstream infection (which can be fatal) is much higher and the quality of your treatments is lower. Furthermore, taking a shower and swimming are not allowed with a catheter. Numbing cream or cold spray may be prescribed to lessen the feel of the needles.

Psychologist’s answer: There are many techniques for feeling more relaxed when thinking about needles. Preparing by relaxing prior to procedures can be quite useful for some, but relaxation can also increase the vasovagal response leading to lower blood pressure and fainting. When a person is having this experience, applied tension can be useful. Applied tension involves tensing and releasing muscles groups to increase blood pressure and counter the body’s response of decreased blood pressure. It can obviously be more painful to be tensing a muscle during an injection, so it is recommended that



a patient tense the opposite arm or leg or another part of the body. You can take a small tension ball to squeeze in the alternate hand. You can ask your healthcare provider if you want more information on this technique.

Positive reframe: “Taking a shower and swimming mean less restriction and increased freedom.” “I can control my discomfort or worry about needles so that I get the best healthcare.”

5 Why do I feel exhausted after completing my hemodialysis treatment?

Nephrologist’s answer: Typically, standard hemodialysis attempts to accomplish in 12 hours what normal kidneys do in 168 hours, when viewed from a weekly frame of reference. Thus, the rate of removing fluid and the waste products of metabolism occurs much more rapidly than is the case without kidney failure. In addition, the body electrolytes and minerals are ‘normalized’ rapidly as well. These changes result in one’s feeling ‘washed out’ and tend to be more profound the older one’s age.

Psychologist’s answer: Increasing overall health can help to counter some of this effect. Focusing on eating well, having good sleep hygiene, and exercising (getting some activity) daily increases overall health and feelings of well-being. It can be helpful to plan activities mindfully around your dialysis schedule so that you maximize energy levels. Tuning into when you can push and acknowledging that you feel tired because your body is “regrouping” and “recharging” after dialysis can be helpful. For some patients, fatigue is a motivator to ingest less fluid between treatments so that the body experiences less stress during dialysis. ■