What is a nephrologist? A nephrologist is a physician trained in the diagnosis, management, and treatment of kidney disease, kidney transplantation, and dialysis. Nephrologists diagnose and treat patients with acute kidney disease, chronic kidney disease, kidney transplants and illnesses related to electrolyte and acid-base abnormalities. Nephrologists perform kidney biopsies, prescribe, manage, and oversee the dialysis procedure and often serve as the principal care physician for patients with end stage kidney failure who require dialysis.

What is chronic kidney disease? Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is the gradual loss of kidney function.

What is the cause of CKD? Diabetes and hypertension are the leading causes of CKD. Other causes include hereditary kidney diseases such as polycystic kidney disease, and those related to vascular, inflammatory, and immunologic diseases.

What is end stage renal disease (ESRD)? ESRD is the Medicare diagnosis for a level of kidney function which is considered permanent and insufficient to sustain life without dialysis for the majority of patients. This corresponds to a level of kidney function known as Stage 5 CKD and signifies that the patient is eligible for enrollment in the Medicare ESRD program, the only disease-specific entitlement program in Medicare where a beneficiary can be enrolled regardless of age.

What is kidney transplantation? A kidney transplant is the surgical procedure that places a healthy kidney from a living or deceased donor into a patient whose kidneys no longer function properly.

What is dialysis? Dialysis is a process by which the patient’s blood is cleaned and filtered to temporarily rid the body of harmful wastes, extra salt, and extra water. Hemodialysis uses a machine with a special filter called a dialyzer that functions as an artificial kidney to clean the patient’s blood. With peritoneal dialysis, the patient’s peritoneum (native lining of the abdominal cavity) serves as the exchange filter for the cleansing process of wastes and removal of extra fluid. Both hemodialysis and peritoneal dialysis can be achieved in the patient’s home.

What is the required training to become a nephrologist? To become a nephrologist, a physician must undergo specialty training in internal medicine (3-year residency) followed by fellowship training in the subspecialty of nephrology (2-3 years). For nephrologists choosing to further sub-specialize in areas of transplantation, critical care or interventional nephrology, additional training may be required.

What is the range of career options available to nephrologists? Career opportunities available to nephrologists include those of the cognitive clinician (practicing both inpatient and outpatient care or both); academician (providing training to prospective nephrologists); researcher (performing research on kidney disease); and interventional nephrologist (performing vascular access and other nephrologic surgical procedures), among others. Many nephrologists see patients with CKD across the continuum of good to poor kidney function including those on dialysis and those not; others specialize in dialysis or transplantation or even critical care nephrology.

What is the RPA? The Renal Physicians Association (RPA) was founded in 1974 as a professional membership organization for nephrologists. RPA represents and serves nephrologists in their pursuit and delivery of quality kidney care. RPA acts as the national representative for physicians engaged in the study and management of patients with kidney disease whose goals are to ensure optimal care under the highest standards of medical practice. RPA represents the nephrology discipline in the American Medical Association House of Delegates.

The Renal Physicians Association (RPA) is the professional organization of nephrologists whose goal is to ensure quality care under the highest standards of medical practice for patients with kidney disease and related disorders. For further information, please contact Robert Blaser, RPA’s Director of Public Policy, at 301-468-3515 or rblaser@renalmd.org