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“Protect the kidneys, save the heart” – in Austria alone, more than one million people suffer from chronic kidney disorders

Simple tests and an early detection drive led by general practitioners aims to reduce new incidents of kidney disease and prevent the development of subsequent cardiovascular conditions. The Austrian pilot project and the latest research findings in the field of nephrology will be presented at the Austria Center Vienna from 21-24 May at the European ERA-EDTA Kidney Congress.

- Status quo: 1 million Austrians suffer from mild chronic kidney damage and a further 200,000 have significant renal disorders
- Additional issue: three quarters of those affected have no idea they are living with a kidney condition
- Simple early detection through blood and urine tests can save lives, particularly in high-risk groups
- Kidney damage is a key indicator for subsequent cardiovascular conditions such as heart attack, stroke and heart failure, triggering the heartfelt plea: “protect the kidneys, save the heart!”
- Austrian pilot project as international prevention pioneer: increased collaboration between general practitioners intended to keep number of new cases in check and cut healthcare costs

10-13% of Austrian suffer from some form of kidney disorder

“Chronic kidney diseases tend to creep up on the patient, and although there is a distinct absence of symptoms or pain, they can be life threatening,” cautioned Prof. Karl Lhotta, head of nephrology at Landeskrankenhaus Feldkirch in Vorarlberg and President of the Austrian Society of Nephrology (ÖGN). He estimates that 10-13% of the Austrian population, or around 1 million people, are currently suffering from mild chronic kidney damage. A further 200,000 Austrians suffer from chronic kidney disease where loss of renal function exceeds 50%. “The most alarming thing is that around three quarters of people with chronic kidney disease have no idea that they are affected. And just two thirds of those who are aware of their condition actually receive treatment. This inevitably brings about further degeneration, and can ultimately lead to the need for dialysis. It also results in an increased incidence of conditions such as high blood pressure, anaemia, fatigue, uraemia and oedema. In the majority of cases, other blood vessels are damaged, which dramatically increases the risk of cardio-vascular disease. The outcomes are significantly shorter life expectancy and greatly reduced quality of life. Many of the symptoms and conditions triggered by kidney disease can be avoided given the right therapy, or at least kept to a minimum,” Lhotta
explained.

**Simple early detection using blood and urine tests**

High-risk patients, i.e. people already suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity or cardio-vascular issues, or those with a family history of kidney disease, should undergo simple preventive healthcare screening at least once a year. "Blood tests and urine analysis are two simple, cheap and pain-free detection methods, both of which can be conducted by a general practitioner," Lhotta confirmed. These tests determine creatinine levels in the blood and the albumin content of the urine. If higher creatinine content is established, it indicates significantly impaired kidney function. Increased protein in the urine points towards damage to the filters in the kidney as well as other smaller blood vessels in the body.

"If the patient has chronic kidney disease, they should change their lifestyle, exercise more, quit smoking, adopt a healthy diet that is low in salt and protein and take medication to reduce both blood pressure and cholesterol levels. In the largest risk group, diabetes patients, establishing optimal blood sugar levels is also essential," Karl Lhotta added. All of these measures not only protect the kidneys, but all of the other blood vessels in the body and, in turn, the heart.

**Kidney damage as indicator for increased risk of stroke or heart attack**

Regular kidney check-ups also represent a major step towards preventing cardiovascular disease. “The kidneys contain around a third of all the body's blood vessels. If the tests detect a narrowing of the blood vessels in the kidney it is a clear indication of vascular disease elsewhere and an increased risk for the patient of subsequently developing cardiovascular complications such as heart attack, stroke and heart failure," Lhotta noted. With this in mind, his mantra is “protect the kidneys and save the heart!”

**Austrian 60/20 prevention pilot project**

In Austria, general practitioners remain the leading point of contact for sufferers and play a key role in early recognition as the group charged with conducting preventive healthcare examinations. In fact, around 90% of kidney disorders are discovered by general practitioners, who also provide initial treatment. Only the most serious cases – the remaining 10% of kidney diseases – are treated by kidney specialists," Prof. Lhotta confirmed.

This is why the 60/20 screening programme established by Prof. Alexander Rosenkranz, head of the Clinical Department of Nephrology at the Landeskrankenhaus-Universitätsklinikum Graz, Past President of the ÖGN and Congress Secretary of the ERA-EDTA Congress in Styria in January this year, is targeting general practitioners, hospital outpatient clinics and the general public with an extensive information campaign. A glomerular filtration rate (GFR) of below 60 may mean kidney disease while a GFR of 20 or below is taken as the point at which patients require replacement therapies such as dialysis or transplantation. The aim of the project is to identify cardiovascular disease at an early stage and initiate countermeasures when kidney function drops to 60%, in order to prevent any further deterioration, as well as to provide information on the treatment options available in cases where kidney functions reaches 20%.

The ÖGN hopes that the 60/20 prevention strategy will lead to fewer new cases, improved recovery outcomes thanks to early recognition and a significant decline in long-term
treatment costs. Early-detection blood and urine tests cost just EUR 5, while a dialysis patient can easily rack up treatment costs of EUR 60,000 per year.

“Austria is playing an pioneering role on the international stage with this prevention project. Although a resolution was passed in 2013 for a pan-European initiative, the Styria project has seen Austria become the first country to implement a highly structured plan,” Lhotta concluded. This was made possible by the health reform in Austria and inclusion of the project in the Styrian provincial steering charter. Talks are currently under way with a view to extending the project to Vorarlberg and Carinthia.

About ÖGN and ERA-EDTA
The Austrian Society of Nephrology (ÖGN) is dedicated to improving clinical nephrology with a special focus on dialysis and kidney transplantation. Between 21 and 24 May the European Renal Association – European Dialysis and Transplantation Association (ERA-EDTA) and the ÖGN will co-host the ERA-EDTA Congress at the Austria Center Vienna. With more than 7,000 delegates, the ERA-EDTA Congress is Europe’s largest nephrology and hypertension forum.

About the Austria Center Vienna
The Austria Center Vienna is operated by Internationales Amtssitz- und Konferenzzentrum Wien, Aktiengesellschaft (IAKW-AG), which is also responsible for maintaining the Vienna International Centre (VIC). The Austria Center Vienna is Austria’s largest conference centre, with 24 halls, 180 meeting rooms, and some 42,000 square metres of event space (including 22,000 square metres of exhibition space), and is one of the top players on the international conference circuit. IAKW-AG and the Austria Center Vienna are headed by Chief Executive Officer Susanne Baumann-Söllner. www.acv.at.

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