

What is a Urologist?

A urologist is a physician who is trained to evaluate the genitourinary tract, which includes the kidneys, urinary bladder and genital structures in men and women, and the prostate and testicles in men.

The urologist has the knowledge and technological resources to evaluate the function of these structures, the conditions and diseases that can affect them and their normal operation and the medical and surgical tools to optimize their function, treat the conditions and diseases of these organs and enhance an individual's quality of life. Since the conditions that effect the genitourinary tract can affect men and women of all ages as well as children, the urologist has the opportunity to take care of the entire population.

The American Urological Association Foundation, Inc. has established six Advisory Councils, comprised of experts in the various subspecialty areas, to educate the public on issues and problems involving the genitourinary tract. In the following, members of these councils will describe further what a urologist is and what a urologist does in dealing with conditions of the urinary tract and how urologic subspecialties apply various tools in diagnosing, assessing and treating these conditions.

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WHEN SHOULD YOU SEE A UROLOGIST?

The urologist functions first as a compassionate physician who reviews the problem that has brought a patient for consultation. These problems, generally described as symptoms, may involve:

- discomfort while urinating
- a sense of difficulty in completely emptying the bladder
- incontinence, a loss of urinary control
- hematuria, the appearance of blood in the urine
- the sensation of pain appearing to be related to one of the structures of the urinary tract
- problems with sexual function
- infertility, difficulties involved in conceiving a child

Sometimes, a patient's complaints may involve findings that have been made incidentally through X-rays or ultrasound studies in which an abnormality in one of the urinary tract structures was found.

TESTS

In reviewing an individual's symptoms, the urologist may suggest possible causes (differential diagnosis), then proceed to a patient examination to determine some of the following:

- If there are any areas of discomfort (tenderness) in the abdomen, testicles or prostate—discomfort in the prostate is evaluated by a digital rectal examination (DRE) in which a lubricated gloved finger is inserted into the rectum to feel for abnormalities.
- If the bladder is fully emptied after the patient urinates, to evaluate whether there is an enlargement or swelling of the urinary tract structures (kidneys, testicles or prostate).
- If there is loss of urinary control.

Other tests may be important in fully evaluating an individual's symptoms or particular problem.

The urologist will also examine the urine (urinalysis) to determine whether there are inflammatory cells (suggesting the possible presence of an infection) or blood in the urine (hematuria), and to determine whether sugar or protein are present, which may be associated with diabetes, or conditions involving the kidneys.

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After an exam, the urologist will determine if imaging studies, such as ultrasound, computerized axial tomography (CAT) scanning, various nuclear scans or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) are needed to assess the integrity of the urinary tract structures and any abnormality that may be present (e.g. kidney stones, abnormal anatomy, cancer). Blood tests are often used to determine if an infection or an obstructing kidney stone may have affected normal kidney function or whether an inflammatory condition or cancer of the prostate has caused a rise in prostate-specific antigen (PSA). Urine may be sent for culture to determine the presence of infection, or for urinary cytology to determine if there are any malignant cells in the urine. Other tests include urodynamics (in which the neurologic and muscular function of urination are evaluated), cystoscopy (in which the lining of the bladder is examined) or evaluation of the quality of semen and sperm.

TREATMENTS

On the basis of an overall evaluation of symptoms, physical examination, tests and examinations, recommendations on how to relieve symptoms or address conditions or abnormalities may be made. This treatment can involve medications, surgery or simple observation since it is not uncommon that time will allow resolution of some problem. Furthermore, an understanding of what is causing particular symptoms may permit an individual to adjust to the problem; and an individual's own body may modify the symptoms through "behavioral modification."

UROLOGICAL SUBSPECIALITIES

The complexity of knowledge and rapid development of technologies used to assess and treat the conditions affecting the genitourinary tract have prompted the development of subspecialities within urology. This allows the urologist who is trained in all aspects of urology to specialize further, adding to the opportunity to evaluate and treat conditions and diseases that relate specifically to subspecialty areas. These subspecialty areas lie under the broad umbrella “general urology.”

pediatric urology:

urologic conditions that affect children

urologic oncology:

cancers of the kidney, bladder, prostate and testicle

renal transplantation:

related to renal insufficiency and end-stage renal disease

male infertility:

the diminished or absent ability for a male to conceive

calculi:

urologic stone disease

female urology:

conditions that pertain largely to normal urinary function in women, urinary incontinence and pelvic outlet relaxation disorders

neurourology:

involves the normal neurologic and muscular control of urinary function, voiding disorders, urodynamic evaluation of patient and erectile dysfunction

The American Urological Association Foundation, Inc. (formerly the American Foundation for Urologic Disease, Inc.) is a charitable organization established to raise funds for research, lay education and patient advocacy for the prevention, detection, management and cure of urologic diseases.

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