The hidden costs of dialysis treatment (April 2014)


The dollar amounts for the calculations made in the above cited sources change rapidly. The National Kidney Foundation states that the average cost of a living donor kidney transplant for an adult in 2011 was $262,900. This figure includes a pre-transplant work-up, 180 days of postoperative care for both donor and recipient, and a yearly average of $36,400 for immunosuppressant drugs. See [www.transplantliving.org](http://www.transplantliving.org). Dialysis on the other hand in 2009 cost per person on average $82,285 for hemodialysis and $61,588 for peritoneal dialysis. See the United States Renal Data System. (USRD)’s article “Costs of ESRD.” In the 2011 USRDS Annual Data Report. (2011) Vol. 2, pp. 281–90.

The number of end-stage renal disease (ESRD) patients has grown from 60,000 patients in 1980 to nearly 600,000 in 2010. That is a 1,000% increase in 30 years. OPTN data base.


For more the discussion on this point see the conclusion of *The Kidney Sellers* (Carolina Academic Press, 2014)

Medicare costs for dialysis for a single patient on average in 2010 was $77,156— but that doesn’t include coverage for treating common complications not directly related to dialysis, such as diabetes and heart
disease — when these treatment costs are factored in, estimates are that the average Medicare cost of treating a dialysis patient may be closer to $375,000. The average Medicare cost for a transplant patient (cost of the transplant operation, post-operative care, maintenance medications, and surgical removal if the transplant failed) in 2010 was only $32,914.* This also doesn’t include the cost of treating comorbidities, but if a patient received a preemptive transplant or a transplant within the first six months of going on dialysis, such costs are likely to be very low compared to those of patients who spend longer on dialysis. Statistically, medical costs rise exponentially the longer a patient is on dialysis because of a high rate of general system deterioration.

* The initial cost of a transplant operation can vary from about $50,000 to $200,000, but the average cost of maintaining a transplant is only about $15,000 a year. See Notes section for more detail.

In the United States caring for ESRD patients cost $42.50 billion dollars in 2009 ($29.03 billion paid by Medicare and $13.47 billion by private funds). In 2010 caring for ESRD patients comprised 6.3% of the total Medicare budget.

Hard to measure, but not insignificant, are the costs of pain and suffering associated with life on dialysis which, in general, are estimated to be much higher than the costs associated with having a transplant. Also, nearly impossible to calculate are costs to society when dialysis patients stop working, such as disability payments, lost tax revenue, and the financial and emotional stress on family and friends. Note that patients who go on disability when they start dialysis rarely return to work, even if they get a transplant. People who get a preemptive transplant usually return to work after taking medical leave.