

Kidney cysts and masses: what an incidental finding means

A kidney cyst or mass found on a scan is not automatically an emergency: simple cysts are extremely common and usually need no treatment, while complex cysts and solid enhancing masses need a more careful workup. When treatment is considered, surveillance, ablation, partial nephrectomy and radical nephrectomy should be compared for both cancer control and kidney preservation.

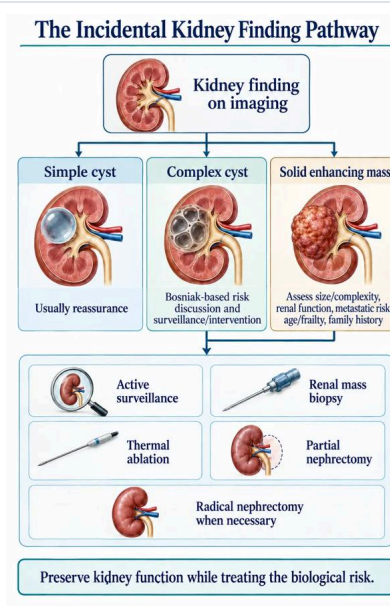


Figure 30.1. The Incidental Kidney Finding Pathway. Kidney findings are classified by imaging behavior, complexity, growth, patient health, and the value of more information.

Key points

- Ask for the finding to be named precisely: simple cyst, complex cyst, solid enhancing mass or indeterminate lesion.
- Simple kidney cysts are extremely common and usually need no treatment.
- Even among small solid masses, biology varies, and some can be observed safely in selected patients.
- A kidney mass biopsy is most useful when its result can change management; a nondiagnostic biopsy does not prove a mass is benign.
- Partial nephrectomy preserves kidney tissue and is prioritized for many small localized masses.
- Active surveillance is structured imaging and reassessment, not denial.

Questions to ask your urologist

- Is this a simple cyst, a complex cyst, a solid enhancing mass or an indeterminate lesion?
- How certain is the imaging classification, and would more imaging change it?
- Would a biopsy result change the plan?
- How do surveillance, ablation, partial nephrectomy and radical nephrectomy compare for cancer control and kidney function in my case?
- If we watch it, what scan, at what interval, and what finding would prompt treatment?
- Should I have genetic counseling?

