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Group alerts Georgians to “silent killer” – urges residents at risk to get tested now

(ATLANTA, Ga.) – Imagine 280 Georgia Domes full of screaming basketball fans. Now imagine all those huge arenas full of Americans who have a silent, deadly disease. Chronic kidney disease (CKD), which affects 20 million people, is now the ninth leading cause of death in the U.S., and it is growing at a steady and alarming rate – doubling every 10 years. Each year the cost of managing CKD exceeds \$32 billion in public and private spending. Georgia Medical Care Foundation (GMCF), the state’s Medicare Quality Improvement Organization, is working to improve care for residents with Medicare and CKD, and urges at-risk residents to be tested.

Diabetes is the leading cause of kidney disease and kidney failure, both of which are very serious conditions that can lead to poor health and death. People who have high blood pressure may also be a risk for CKD.

“March, which is National Kidney month, is a perfect time to call attention to the fact that most people who have kidney disease don’t know it. That is the real ‘madness’ this March,” said JoVonn C. Hughley, MPH, who heads the CKD Quality Initiative at GMCF.

Hughley explained that most people do not have outward symptoms early on. In fact, many do not have symptoms for as long as 30 years or more. This is called the “silent phase” of the disease,

“The only way to know if you have CKD is to get some simple medical tests,” said Hughley. She urged people with diabetes and/or high blood pressure to ask their doctor about:

- Blood pressure check
- Urine test
- Blood test (for eGFR - estimated glomerular filtration rate)

“If you do not have a doctor you see regularly, you should look for free kidney screenings in your community,” said Hughley. The local national Kidney Foundation provides screening in many communities.

Managing diabetes helps to protect kidneys. Diabetes management includes monitoring blood glucose according to the recommended schedule and monitoring blood pressure (keeping it below 130/80 mmHg, according to the America Diabetes Association).

“It is very important to get your kidneys checked at least once a year,” explained Hughley. “The sooner kidney disease is found, the sooner you can take steps to begin treatment and keep your kidneys healthier longer.”

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) is funding and coordinating this effort in Georgia and nine other pilot states as well as in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Over 200 physicians are working in Georgia alone to implement system changes to greatly improve the quality of CKD monitoring. These physicians are enhancing quality of life for their patients, reducing death rates, and saving health costs by preserving kidney health. “It’s a noble goal, but it is vital that patients get in and get tested,” said Hughley.

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GMCF is a not-for-profit, physician-sponsored organization dedicated to continuously improving health care. In operation since 1970, GMCF provides innovative health care solutions focused on quality improvement, utilization management, medical review, and health care outcomes research. For more than 20 years GMCF has served as the Medicare Quality Improvement Organization (QIO) for Georgia through a contract with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. For more information, please visit www.gmcf.org.

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