BK Virus

What is BK Virus?

BK Virus is a common virus that many people are exposed to in their normal life. Primary infection generally does not cause symptoms for people with healthy immune systems because they are able to fight it off without getting sick. Once BK virus infects a person, the virus remains in your body for life, but a healthy immune system keeps the virus inactive. However in kidney transplant patients, the BK virus can become active and can possibly cause damage to the transplanted kidney.

How did I get it?

BK virus was probably already present in your body before the transplant. Most of people in the United States are carriers of BK virus. You were probably exposed at some point in your life but did not know it.

Is it contagious? Do I need to worry about spreading it to other people?

There is a good chance that the people around you have already been exposed. You do not need to worry about spreading it to other people.

What are the symptoms of BK virus?

Generally, there are no symptoms of BK virus.

How do you know I have it?

BK virus is detected by a blood test. At the University of Wisconsin Hospital, we routinely schedule blood tests to screen all kidney transplant patients for BK virus for the first 2 years after transplant. Your transplant coordinator will arrange for additional blood tests to screen for active BK virus infection if she is worried that you may be at risk based on your lab results or following changes in your immunosuppression medicines. A kidney transplant biopsy may be performed to see if the BK virus infection is causing damage to your kidney transplant.

What do I need to do about it? Can you treat it?

If you have active BK virus in your blood, your doctor or transplant coordinator may decrease the doses of your immunosuppression (anti-rejection) medicines. This will help your own body fight the BK virus to clear it from your blood before it can problems with your kidney transplant function. Sometimes, we may give you additional medicine to treat the BK virus.
How will you know it’s gone?

If you have been diagnosed with an active BK virus infection, your coordinator will check your blood often to see if the virus is going away or getting stronger.

If I have BK, will my kidney be ok?

Although the BK virus can affect your kidney transplant, your doctor and coordinator will watch the virus closely. We most often catch BK in the blood before it causes damage to the new kidney. Your doctor and coordinator will discuss the treatment with you and try to stop the virus from hurting the new kidney.