



The Renal Diet
An Interview with Angela Martinez
Network #15 Patient Leadership Committee Member

Angela Martinez has diabetes and has been doing in-center hemodialysis for two years.

I didn't take care of myself. I was young and I thought I was invincible. By the time I realized I needed to change what I was doing and start taking care of myself, protein was found in my urine.

What did you think about the renal diet when you first started dialysis?

It was hard because it was so different than anything I had done before. I was someone who had little self discipline. I wanted what I wanted when and where I wanted it. Self discipline becomes a MUST when you are dealing with any illness.

Were there some aspects of the renal diet that you were already following?

No, I met with a dietitian once pre-dialysis. Information was limited and focused on keeping the start of dialysis at bay. I may have been able to meet with the dietitian more than once, but I was focused on doing everything I could to keep from needing to start dialysis. I had 2-4 months notice that my kidneys were failing.

How has your diet changed since starting dialysis?

It was really rough in the beginning. As a diabetic I was taught to eat lean meat, whole grain, fresh fruits and vegetables. When I started dialysis I was told to stay away from whole grain breads and eat white bread which I didn't like and the fresh fruit and vegetable choices were limited.

What were your feelings at the time about the diet restrictions?

I hated the diet! I was frustrated and angry that I had to make so many changes. I was mourning the life I had before I got sick. I had to deal with all the emotions of mourning the loss of my life before dialysis.

Who has helped you the most to learn about the diet?

The dietitian has taught me a lot and Jamie, a PCT, has always encouraged me. She would always tell me "You can do it!" Kevin the administrator would encourage me and other patients by making dishes from renal diet recipes and bringing them to the dialysis center for all the patients to sample. He would encourage me to try the recipes at home. The food was always good which helped me realize that I could still enjoy good food when I follow the renal diet.

Who helps you stay on track with the diet?

My boyfriend of eight years. He was my nursemaid when I was so sick at the time I started dialysis and he is always my encourager. I'm also motivated to stay on track because I want a transplant. I'm determined to get a transplant so I take care of myself. You feel better when you stay on track with the diet which is also encouraging. Talk to other patients, exchange phone numbers, make lunch or dinner dates and before you know it you will have a support group of people who know exactly where you are coming from. In this day and age you can still enjoy life being on dialysis. DON'T HESITATE TO ASK FOR HELP!

What do you do to keep from focusing on the things you love to eat but can't because of the diet restrictions?

I just think about the consequences of my actions. When you're feeling bad, you have to take a look at what you're doing that may be making you feel bad – like making poor food choices. There is almost always something else you can do or consider as an alternative for a particular craving. I love hot dogs so when I have a craving for one, I just think about how puffy I'll get if I eat one.

Do you allow yourself "treats" of your favorite foods that aren't part of the renal diet?

If I just have to have a hot dog, I will eat a half of one instead of a whole one and give the other half to my boyfriend who will make sure I don't eat it too! If you just can't go without a certain favorite food, then eat a small portion every once in a while.

How has your attitude about the renal diet changed over time?

I've learned that if you don't take accountability for your own health, no one else will. I've learned that I don't have to give up a lot. I recently had a craving for Chinese food and asked my dietitian for a recipe I could try. She gave me a recipe that was an easy one-pot dish to make and it was delicious! I have also educated my whole family about limiting salt intake. I don't keep salt in my house anymore.

What was the most difficult challenge about the diet in the beginning?

I was so sick and weak I had to rely on other people to cook for me. Getting them to cook without salt was the hardest.

What is the most difficult challenge now?

Dairy products. I love yogurt! I used to bring yogurt to eat in the dialysis center and the staff asked me not to bring it anymore. I had to find something to satisfy me and keep me busy during dialysis. I've pretty much weaned myself off yogurt and now I bring fruit that I can munch on during my treatment and I love it!

Does your family eat the same foods as you or do they eat differently at meals?

Most of the time they eat what I eat. I don't go out of my way to make a separate meal. When my kids see me making something from a renal recipe, they might make a fuss, but many times they don't know and I don't tell them and they like the dish I prepared! Sometimes the family misses salt, though.

Where do you go to get ideas for recipes/meal plans?

From the DaVita web site, but mostly from my dietitian. She posts recipes on the bulletin board and has a big recipe book available for anyone who is interested.

What do you do when you go out to eat?

My boyfriend and I aren't big on going out to eat since I started dialysis.

If I was a patient coming to you and saying I just don't know how I'm going to do this diet, what would you say to me?

I would say that change is very hard, so take small steps, baby steps. Change little things one at a time. You'll be surprised when you go along and look back and see all that you've done. Awareness is the key. A lot of people don't like to be told that they can't have certain things. But that's how we learn – knowing what to do and what not to do. You have to ask for help. Some patients and caregivers don't ask for help. It's important for caregivers to know about the renal diet so they can make the right food choices for their family member who is on dialysis. The dietitian has a lot of resources. There's a recipe for almost everything, even "mac and cheese"! Ultimately, you have to realize you pay the price for your decisions and when you don't make good choices, you're not hurting anyone but yourself.

What advice would you give staff about what they can do to help patients be successful with the renal diet?

Always be encouraging. When patients get frustrated, remind them they can do it! I also have a responsibility as a patient because other patients see what I bring to the dialysis center. I brought in a "Big Gulp" one day because it was cheaper than a can of soda but I had no intention of drinking the whole thing. I talked with one of the staff who was asking why I brought it in and I told her the reason. Then I realized that other patients who see me might think it's okay to drink a "Big Gulp" so I never brought one in again!

What have you learned about yourself from dealing with the challenge of changing your eating habits?

That I'm stronger than I thought I was. Change is hard but I've learned to turn it into something fun, like finding renal recipes that fit my cravings. I'm teaching my family and friends how to eat healthier just by giving up salt. In the beginning, I thought it would be easier to give up than to make all the hard changes that come with being on dialysis. I'm so glad I didn't. Everyone needs something to motivate them to change. My granddaughter was what motivated me to take care of myself. I couldn't keep up with her when I started dialysis and now I can. When you want the best for yourself, you'll do the best for yourself.