

It all started when I made a New Year's resolution to take my vitamins. Not really for health reasons. More because I had amassed quite a collection of them. And am too damn cheap to throw them away. Soooo, let's take them and free up some space in the bathroom cabinet for other unnecessary pharmaceuticals and cosmetics that I can waste my money on. Two weeks into January, I have an odd uncomfortable feeling in my mid-back on the right side. And I feel like I need to pee all the time. This must be a bladder infection. I notice it Saturday night, but Sunday I start a messy house project, and get so involved I don't really notice it. Monday morning I am still uncomfortable, so I call both my internist and gynecologist to see who can get me in the quickest. I am put on infinite hold at the gynecologist so the 3pm GP time-slot gets the nod. I go, dutifully pee in the cup, get poked and prodded by a female Doogie Howser physician's assistant, and leave with a prescription for an antibiotic, knowing that within 24 hours I will be well on the road to recovery.

The miracle antibiotic hasn't worked by the next morning. I just really don't feel well, but nothing particularly acute. Well, not until an hour after I get to work.

First it just feels very uncomfortable to sit. After about an hour of this, the only thing that works is to stand up and lean over at a 90 degree angle. What are my co-workers thinking?

I call the doctor's office and leave a message, and am assured that the physician's assistant will get back to me after her next patient. 45 minutes later I go to the bathroom. There is excruciating pain in my lower right abdomen. And there are the most beautiful little shards of what look like red glass in the toilet. Can it be some kind of terrible latent venereal disease? Did the fall off the horse last week crush something vital that is now in the bottom of the commode? This is really scary, for those who have never experienced it.

I try the doctor's office again. This time I tell the recep-

tionist that I am peeing blood, am in incredible pain, and would she please have someone call me right away. When 15 minutes pass with no call, I decide to go to the emergency room. I am halfway there when the PA calls back. She tells me if I come to her office she will see me right away. Since that sounds slightly more appealing than sitting in a waiting room at Fairfax Hospital, not to mention that it is closer to where I am, I head there. I tell the receptionist that PA Driscoll wants to see me right away, and she continues to file her nails. I still can't sit. I spend a few minutes leaning over a chair in the waiting room. Now the receptionist is making dinner reservations. Another 10 minutes go by. It must

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## Ode to a KIDNEY STONE

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be lunchtime because now there is only one other person in the waiting room. Now I tell the receptionist that I think I am going to throw up and I don't think she really wants me in the waiting room anymore. I guess she agrees, because she escorts me to a bathroom and tells me that she will tell the PA where I am. Now I wait here for 15 minutes. Thankfully I have the where-with-all to lock the door, because someone keeps coming up and trying to open it. Don't people know to knock on a closed restroom door before just trying it? They are nothing if not persistent, and at

least four times they try the door.

I am feeling a little less nauseous. I know that I am going to have to pee in the cup, so I decide to go ahead and get it over with. I leave the restroom with the rosé urine and lean up against the wall in the hallway. Daniel, the cute young Rastafarian nurse comes along, takes one look at me, one look at the cup, and finds an empty examining room. He stays with me and looks appropriately concerned for the couple of minutes that it takes to find the PA. She comes in the examining room, looks at my chart for a few minutes as if she did not just see me yesterday, and then asks, "Are you sure you don't just have your period?" (See below for the top ten things NOT to say to someone who has a kidney stone.) Okay, I know that I have been having my period for 35 years and she has only been having hers for about three, but

don't they teach you anything in medical school? I bite my tongue and assure her that I am not "only" having my period.

She pokes and prods again, and we discuss the various symptoms of appendicitis and kidney stones. Then she goes to get the big guns. An actual physician. Dr. Kim also pokes and prods. Then they confer outside in the hall. When she returns, she tells me that they need to rule out appendicitis with a CT scan. If it is not appendicitis, then I can have drugs. It seems to me that the bloody glass-like shards in my urine are no symptoms of appendicitis that I have ever heard of, but she rationalizes her plan of attack. I have a 3 o'clock appointment at Fairfax Radiology so I have to rush to their office right now to get the contrast solution that I have to begin downing immediately so that it will be in the right place at the right time for the scan.

The radiology office offers a multitude of flavors, all of which sound totally disgusting. As if she were a server in a fine restaurant, I ask the receptionist which flavor is the most popular. "Some people really like the vanilla, but others find it on the sweet side. The cherry is pretty popular, and a lot of folks like the lemon/lime. She admits that she has never tried any of them. I choose the lemon/lime which I drink with gusto knowing that whatever happens, I will at least get pain medication when the scan is over. I have to drink a half a liter now (that's 17 oz. by the way – funny how it doesn't seem

like that much when it is a beer. . .) Another half-liter in a half an hour. The third installment 30 minutes after that, and the final right before the scan. Just to put it into perspective, that's like drinking a two liter bottle of your favorite soft drink in about 90 minutes. Only it is far from being your favorite anything. And what goes in must come out, which I am not looking forward to. I go home for an hour and a half and curl up on the bed in a fetal position between bouts of sucking down the contrast solution. At 3 o'clock I am back with my final half liter in tow for the scan. And I wait.

It is 4 o'clock before I am called. I am comforted by rationalizing that if I had gone to Fairfax Hospital Emergency Room I would probably still be waiting to see the doctor. The technician is great. He asks me if I need a wheelchair, and when I say no gently escorts me to the CT "suite". Steve is a cute big dude who calls me "honey" and "sweetie" and has a nice southern accent. I feel at home. Then I see the needles. No one has mentioned that there will be an IV involved. I feel my veins shrinking to the innermost center of my arm. I beg the tech to tell me that he is a pro when it comes to finding veins, and he does. He also explains that I will have a warm feeling in my abdomen when the contrast solution is injected into my veins. He inserts the IV needle, and he is indeed a pro. I drink the last half liter of the lemon/lime solution. It is not growing on me. Before he hooks me up to the drip, or perhaps it is more of a flow, he does one scan for comparison. Totally painless.

Then he starts the IV. When he notices the look of horror on my face, he smiles sympathetically and says, "Oh, honey, you feel like you just used the restroom, don't you - I was doing other things and forgot to warn you that would happen. That's normal." I don't feel at all like I have just "used the restroom". I feel like I have just peed two liters all over the CT "suite". Much as I want to, I don't reach down to assure myself that I haven't. And since it isn't excruciatingly painful I'm assuming that he is correct in saying that there was no accident. Quickly, the second scan is over. Amazingly enough, when I surreptitiously look back as I leave the room there is no lake of urine on the scan table. . .

I wait in the waiting room for another half hour. Perhaps calling a room a waiting room is a sort of self-fulfilling prophesy. Maybe it should be called a no-wait room. A magazine room. The green room. I have to use the restroom now, but would really love to wait until I am in the privacy of my own home. Finally the receptionist tells me that the results have been sent to PA Driscoll, and she would like to see me back at her office.

It is now after six and the receptionist at the doctor's has gone for the day. I wonder if she went directly to the restaurant for her dinner reservation. . .Someone notices me and gets PA Driscoll. As she walks me back to the examining room she exclaims "You have a seven millimeter kidney stone." The tone she uses is similar to that of Ed McMahon when he is at the door of the Publisher's Clearance House winner during halftime at the Super Bowl. I want to gush "What have I done to deserve this – does it come with a giant check?" but manage to contain myself. She seems very happy for me, which I don't quite understand. I was actually hoping to have appendicitis, get it removed arthroscopically, and never have to worry about it again. Not only do I now have to get this thing out of me, but will I always be wondering when the next attack will take place? And I'll still have the damned appendix to obsess about, too.

She explains that the stone is about three inches above my bladder, and it won't take long at all before it is "passed". I love that term. Passed. Past. Over. Gone. Done. "When you say not long, how long are we actually talking?" I ask. Not long as in hours? Days? Weeks?

"Probably less than a day," she says. "Make another appointment to see me on Thursday and I'm sure it will have passed by then." She then proceeds to give me a plastic strainer to pee into and the long awaited prescription. Which is Vicodin. Which made me nauseous the only other time I took it. When I tell her this she explains that I will need something that strong as it will be incredibly painful. And that I am probably going to be nauseous from the pain

anyway. And if it does make me nauseous she will be glad to prescribe an anti-nausea drug for me. Bedside manner anyone? I don't say it, but I am thinking, "Okay, I will be in incredible pain which will probably be making me throw up, and then I will have to call the doctor and have her call in a prescription to the pharmacy which I will then have to go pick up?" I vow to take the Vicodin with food to minimize the nausea.

PA Driscoll has called in the prescription to the closest pharmacy, which is obviously also the busiest I find when I get there. There is a line of 11 people in front of me in the pick-up line. I imagine what they are picking up. "OK fat man, I know you're waiting for your Viagra prescription. Outta my way, Vicodin coming through. You probably already have a stash, and you're not gonna get lucky until you lose that belly anyway." Finally I arrive at the front of the line, only to find out they don't have it ready. . .After a few minutes figuring out that my birth date wasn't correct on the order from the doctor, and me whispering loudly across the counter that "I have a kidney stone and I'm really in a lot of pain," the 12 pharmacy techs behind the counter manage to count out the 20 pills and they send me on my way.

I downed the first pill when I got home, waited a few minutes for it to hopefully kick in, and peed into the strainer. Voilà! Instant success - there it is, in the bottom of the strainer, and it is bigger than I'd imagined! But wait, upon closer inspection, the white ball in the bottom of the strainer is actually a part of the plastic strainer. What bastard designed this? How cruel can a person get?



*Totally unnecessary plastic nipple diabolically designed to fool unsuspecting urinators into thinking they've painlessly passed their kidney stone.*

### Top 10 List of What NOT To Say To Someone Who Has a Kidney Stone

1. When they come out, it's just like peeing glass. (FYI my experience is that they don't have to come out to give this sensation - they can stay right where they are.)
2. If you have one, you'll have more.
3. If you have kidney stones, it's only a matter of time before you have gallstones too.
4. Kidney stones are the closest men will ever come to experiencing labor.
5. Are you sure it's not just your period? This one is very bad to say to a woman. Probably not so great to ask a man this either.
6. My father had them, and he died of kidney cancer.
7. I don't think people die from kidney stones anymore.
8. My father's stones always passed when he was travelling.
9. Two Vicodins doesn't even come close to easing the pain. Morphine is the only thing that worked for my brother-in-law.
10. When my cousin had his exploded using ultrasound, he said it felt just like he was getting a beating with a baseball bat. And he's the kind of guy that would know what it is like to get beaten with a baseball bat.

The next 18 hours are a bit of a Vicodin blur. I found that a heaping tablespoon of peanut butter with the caplet was enough to keep the queasiness away. I spoke to several co-workers in an effort to impart all of my deadline wisdom to someone who might actually be able to do something about them. They were polite at the time, but told me later that the speech slurring made it a little difficult to comprehend what I was saying. Funny how I thought I was perfectly fine. . .

And somewhere in that haze, as so often happens, there were epiphanies. Once I visited my sister in the hospital after abdominal surgery and five days of morphine and she asked if one of our childhood neighbors could have been gay. "It just came to me", she said. It had never occurred to me that he wasn't. My epiphany was more of a moral dilemma. What if, well, let's just say that same sister was in need of a kidney. There's no doubt that I would give her one of mine. But would I be a big enough person to give her the normal stone-free left kidney, or would I try to pass off the stoned right one? I spent a lot of time pondering this.

Per orders, I was drinking an incredible amount of water to flush out the kidney stone. The strainer has fooled me at least three times into thinking that the kidney stone has been passed. I excuse this gullibility on my part as pain medication induced, and vow not to be fooled again. By noon on Wednesday my urine was totally clear and I decided to back off the Vicodin. I had occasional twinges, but nothing terribly painful. I watched Oprah for the first time. And several court shows. To think that we used to watch Perry Mason in the afternoons. Little did we know that by the 21st century REAL courtroom drama would take it's place. My house is an utter pigsty. My Sunday project of pulling the old molding off the plaster walls in my hallway created a huge mess. I vacuum up some of the dust and debris, which totally exhausts me, and call it a day at about 8pm.

Thursday I go to work. Partly to get out of my messy house. I do some catching up on emails and client contacts. Then I can't help myself. I get on eBay to find out what a good kidney stone goes for. Amazingly there are none there. I figured it would be a hot item: "Take four days off work and then show your boss THIS". That'd be worth a couple hundred dollars in my book. My research tells me that body parts cannot be sold on eBay. Is it technically a body part? Is a pearl an oyster body part? Do Mick Jagger's fingernail clippings count as body parts? What I do find are medieval looking contraptions and forceps used for the removal of kidney stones.



A kidney stone evacuator. . .



. . .and forceps used for kidney stone extractions. Yes, extractions.

I also research what happens if the stone is perfectly content staying where it is, and am not happy to find that the two best options are ureteroscopy, an invasive surgical procedure that involves inserting a catheter into the urethra then passing it through the bladder and the ureter to remove the stone, or extracorporeal shock wave lithotripsy which sends acoustic shock waves into the body to break up a single kidney stone into smaller pieces so it can be passed through the urethra on its own. No really swell options here.

I go to my appointment with PA Driscoll, and she is thrilled that I am in a relative comfortable state. She assures me that it won't be much longer, but I am beginning to doubt her wisdom.

It's now Friday. And I am now quite tired of having a kidney stone. It doesn't hurt bad enough to take the Vicodin and waste sick days that I might need if this thing isn't going to appear on it's own. I decide to take matters into my own hands, and again go to the Internet for wisdom. Home remedies. Interestingly enough, there are many sites that claim to have a fool proof miracle recipe for getting rid of kidney stones. That they were

all unwilling to share until at least \$9.99 was deposited into an unknown Paypal account. Being desperate, I was just about to pay the \$9.99 when I found a recipe for free: one quarter cup of good quality extra virgin olive oil, and one quarter cup of fresh squeezed lemon juice. I stop at the market on my way home. There are several suggestions for how to take the brew - I choose cold lemon juice shaken with room temperature olive oil swallowed as quickly as possible. It soon becomes apparent that I could have combined this little remedy with a colonoscopy prep and killed two birds with one stone. In about an hour, I've lost several pounds and am ready for bed.

Saturday morning I notice a little brown thing about the size of an obese grain of rice in the toilet bowl. It must be a piece of the plaster from my molding project. It's still there after I flush. Hmmm. I've religiously used the diabolical strainer, but could there have been an immaculate evacuation last night after the miracle cure? Surely I would have known. But something makes me retrieve it and I put it in a 35mm film canister for safe keeping. I still feel the same as I have since Wednesday - tired, no energy, and a slight discomfort when I have to pee. Sunday is about the same.

Monday morning I call PA Driscoll, ready to demand that she give me a referral to see a urologist. Figuring it will take a day or two to get an appointment, another day or two to schedule the ultrasonic blast, the last thing that I want is to have this go on through another weekend. She agrees wholeheartedly, and gives me

a recommendation for someone right down the street. Another miracle happens when I call their office and they tell me they can fit me in that afternoon, but I'll need to bring a copy of my CT scan with me for them to view. Again I'm in luck. Fairfax Radiology is close by and for a small fee I can pick up the films on my way into work.

It turns out that they are not films at all, but a CD. I assume that you'd need proprietary software to view it, but when I pop the disc into my computer the program starts right up. I do some Internet research on how to read a CT scan, and in a short period can identify most of the things I see on the monitor. Holy crap, the white stuff is, indeed, crap. No pun intended. Am I giving the impression that I spend a lot of time at work doing non-work-related things? But what really catches my eye is the white dot on scan number 37 that looks just like a fat grain of rice.

A urologist is a man's gynecologist. I did not know this. I thought you went to the urologist for bladder infections that the gynecologist couldn't cure. Or kidney disease. Or kidney transplants. But no, that doctor would be a Nephrologist. No. A urologist is a man's gynecologist. The waiting room is the first clue. *Yachting*. *Automotive Today*. *Sports Illustrated*. Leather furniture. Dark green. No florals. His personal office has more leather chairs and a large wooden desk with an inset leather top. And no uterus and fetus models. No. Vasectomy models. Prostate models. Viagra. Cialis. Levitra. Flomax, the no-go medicine. Growing/going problem



medicine. No estrogen replacement therapy. No birth control. It's a man's world here. I do find it civilized to have a conversation in an office with all of your clothes on as opposed to sitting naked in a freezing exam room swaddled in a three-foot square paper towel that has a hole cut in it for your head..

Dr. Patel is a cute young Indian man. Are all men in the medical profession cute when you have a kidney stone? When I am escorted into his office, he has my CT scan up on his computer. He gives me a brief run through of the scan and points out major organs and such. He does confess that he's a bit baffled by a thin white arc on several of the images. "Under-wire bra", I tell him. I'm somewhat surprised he's never encountered one of these before.

He gets to the image with the little fat grain of rice and begins by saying that because of the size it is unlikely that I will pass this baby. I interrupt. "Before you get too far into this, I think I may have passed the stone." I pull the 35mm film container out of my coat pocket. He is looking at me with that unbelieving expression - the one where your face is facing downwards but your eyes are looking up. The expression that ultimately says, "I can't believe that you are such a complete idiot" without a single word being uttered. Since he hasn't looked at it yet, he has no idea that I may be a complete idiot for trying to pass off a piece of the plaster out of my wall as a real live kidney stone. . . so I assume that he thinks I am a complete idiot because I don't *know* if I've passed the stone. This is compared to giving birth, for chrissake, how can you not *know*? Well, I guess you do hear about the girl who goes into the bathroom at the prom and gives birth between *Color my World* and *Freebird*, leaves the screaming baby in the stall and returns to the prom a full ten sizes smaller but didn't know she's given birth - so I guess it is possible.

But I digress.

Dr. Patel opens the film canister and shakes out the stone/plaster morsel onto a sheet of paper on his desk. Now he looks at me with the same unbelieving expression, but his eyes are open a lot wider. And he is shaking his head now. "You are luck-ee" he says. "There's probably only a 10 percent chance that someone would pass a stone that size." Obviously the other 90 percent don't know about the guaranteed lemon juice/olive oil remedy. Should I tell him?



*This is not to scale. But anyone who has passed a kidney stone will tell you that they are twice this big.*

So that is pretty much the anti-climatic end of the story. He quizzes me on the causes of kidney stones, and I know I'll ace this based on all of the eSearch I've done during work hours over the last few days. "Genetics," I answer confidently. After all, my father had a kidney stone a few years ago, which is a story in itself. He shakes his head, which shakes my confidence slightly. "Well, I started taking a calcium supplement as my New Year's resolution. . ." not quite as confidently. Again the head shake. I'm all out of answers.

It's quite simple," he says. "You aren't drinking enough water. "You need to constantly flush out your kidneys to keep anything from building up in them." I ponder why WebMD doesn't know this. At first I try to tell him that I drink more water than almost anyone else I know, but I can see he is not going to be swayed.

The insult to injury part of the story? He confiscates the stone because it has to go to the lab for analysis. So much for my idea to sell it on eBay or have it gold-plated and made into a necklace like they do in Brazil with baby teeth. And I bet some entrepreneur in that lab has stolen my idea and is making a mint selling those kidney stones on the black market for work excuses.

*Aggie Sterrett is a freelance photographer and graphic designer in the Washington DC area who drinks copious amounts of water and beer and is eternally grateful to have been stone-free for over six years.*