

My Choices: What I Should Know About Fistulas

In order to get hemodialysis, you will need a blood, or vascular, access. An access allows blood to be taken from the body, cleaned in the dialysis machine and returned to the body. There are three kinds of permanent blood accesses: AV* Fistulas, AV grafts and Tunneled Catheters. Fistulas have been found to be the best type of access for dialysis.

*AV stands for arteriovenous or relating to arteries and veins in the body.

What is a Fistula?

A fistula is a vascular access made with your own vein. During surgery, your artery and vein are joined together under the skin. The vein stretches over time, allowing needles to be put in. To decide if a fistula is an option for you and where to place it, your doctor may order some tests that can be done at an Access Center.

The tests may include: Vessel Mapping, Ultrasound, Doppler and Angiography. Most of the time the fistula will be placed in one of your arms but sometimes it may be placed in a leg.

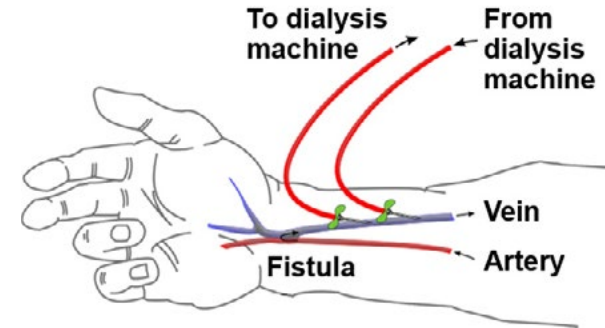
Why are Fistulas the “Gold Standard” for Hemodialysis?

+ Pros

- Permanent
- Under the skin
- Can last up to 20 years
- Increased blood flow
- Fewer infections
- Fewer hospital stays
- Better survival

- Cons

- Can be seen on the forearm
- 6-8 weeks before use
- May need a catheter while waiting to use
- May not mature
- Not all patients can use
- May bleed after needles are taken out



Problems That May Need Medical Attention

- Thrombosis (clotting)
- Fistula does not mature
- Fistula is too deep
- Aneurysm (widening of a blood vessel, looks like a small balloon)
- Steal syndrome
- Fistula collapse
- Stenosis (narrowing of your fistula)

Caring for a New Fistula

After your fistula is placed, it must “mature” to give it time to heal and build up enough blood flow for hemodialysis. This can take at least six to eight weeks. Your doctor will check it and let you know when it is ready to be used. While you are waiting and after it is ready, there are some things you will need to be aware of and do to keep your fistula healthy and working. Using “TLC for your Access,” on the back of this page, can help you prevent the main reasons fistulas fail - infection and low blood flow.



Touch

- **For pulse.** Check for a pulse or buzzing feeling (thrill) through the fistula. Check everyday and after any time you have low blood pressure, dizziness, or feel lightheaded.
- **For tenderness.** You should not have pain when touching your fistula area.
- **For temperature.** Tell your nurse if you have a fever over 101 degrees and/or if your fistula area is warm to the touch.
- **For numbness.** Tell your nurse if your access area, fingers or toes feel numb.



Look

- **At skin color.** There should not be any redness.
- **For swelling.** Tell your nurse about any swelling around the fistula or in your arm.
- **For new bulging.** Tell your nurse, a large bump may be a sign of bleeding under the skin.
- **For drainage.** Tell your nurse. It is not normal to have drainage or pus from your fistula.

My Questions: Ask Your Care Team

- What can I do if I'm afraid of needles?
- What other things can I do to keep my fistula safe and last a long time?
- Who is the best person at the clinic to talk to if I have concerns about my fistula?



Care

- **Keep it clean.** Wash your access daily and at the clinic before and after dialysis, every time. Wash your hands and wear gloves when holding your sites and keep a clean supply of gauze and tape for bleeding with you.
- **Do not use lotion to your access area on dialysis days.** Lotion may keep tape from sticking. Lotion can be used after dialysis and on non-dialysis days.
- **Remove bandages and tape as soon as bleeding stops.** Leaving bandages and tape on for a long time can irritate your skin.
- **Keep it protected.** Blood pressure, blood draws, IV medications, and shots should not be done on your fistula arm.
- **Rotate where needles are placed.** Changing needle stick sites for each treatment will allow it to heal. If it is not rested, it will become weak and could become an aneurysm. Tell your nurse or doctor immediately if this occurs.
- **No resting on arm.** Do not sleep on or lean on your access arm, it could block blood flow and cause a blood clot.
- **No heavy lifting or carrying.** Do not use access arm to lift or carry objects over 10 pounds, including purses or bags.
- **No tight fitting clothing or jewelry on access arm.** Keep clothing loose around your fistula arm.
- **Watch your weight between treatments.** Keeping weight gains down can help with low blood pressure during treatment.