

Preventing haemodialysis catheter infections

What is a haemodialysis catheter?

A haemodialysis catheter is a fine tube made from a synthetic material that is used as an alternative to a fistula or graft. Catheters are most commonly used if you need to dialyse immediately and you don't have time to wait for a graft or fistula to be formed. Some people need a catheter permanently.

Most haemodialysis catheters are inserted by tunnelling it under the skin of the chest and then into a large vein in your chest. This is a tunnelled catheter.

As these catheters are made from a synthetic material, your body regards it as a foreign body and there is a higher risk of infection at either the entry site or of the blood stream. Infection can happen even when there is a good blood flow through the catheter.

The risk of infection is higher in people who dialyse through a catheter.

How do I know if I have an infection?

Your doctor can diagnose infection based on your symptoms and from the results of a microbiological examination of tissue or fluid from the infection site. In severe blood stream infection a blood test is required. These microbiological tests can take 2 or more days to be confirmed.

If you have any of the following, you may have an infection:

- Fever
- Chills
- Drainage from the catheter site
- Redness or tenderness around the catheter site
- Generally feeling unwell and weak.

How are infections treated?

Most infections are easily treated with antibiotic tablets. In serious blood stream infections it may be necessary for the catheter to be removed so that the infection can be treated effectively. Recovery is usually rapid, and most people recover fully. If the infection is more severe, you may need some weeks in hospital for antibiotic treatment through a drip.



How can I prevent infections?

Good care of your catheter can help prevent problems like infection. You need to:

- keep the catheter dressing clean and dry
- always wash your hands before handling your catheter or dressing
- make sure your care givers either wash their hands or use an antiseptic hand rub before handling your catheter
- keep the caps and clamps of your catheter tightly closed when not being used for dialysis. Only your care team should use the catheter for taking blood samples or to give medications
- call your dialysis team if the skin around your catheter feels sore or looks red, or if the dressing has come loose.

For more information about preventing infection in maintenance haemodialysis, go to the dialysis website

www.health.vic.gov.au/renaldialysis