What is a vascular access?

A vascular access is a way to reach the blood vessels for hemodialysis. There are three types:

A fistula is your artery and vein sewed together. Blood from the artery makes the vein thicker so it can be used for dialysis. A fistula is often the longest-lasting access.

A graft is a piece of man-made blood vessel. It is used to connect an artery and a vein together.

A catheter is a plastic tube placed into a vein in the neck, chest, or groin. Catheters may be used for a short time while a fistula or graft is healing. In some patients with very poor veins and arteries, a permanent catheter may be placed in the chest.

Why is a vascular access important to me?

Your access is your dialysis lifeline. You have only a few sites for vascular access. It is important to care for your access so it will last as long as possible.

What happens in access surgery?

A fistula or graft is most often placed in an arm, but sometimes in a leg. Your doctor will decide which type of access will work best for you. Ask your doctor if a fistula will work for you.

Surgery for a fistula or graft is often done with local anesthesia on an outpatient basis. Medication may be needed for mild to moderate pain. Sometimes swelling of the arm may occur for a few days or weeks.

When can my access be used?

It is best to create an access before it is needed for dialysis. If a new access is used too soon after surgery, it can be damaged. A new fistula should ideally not be used for 3 to 4 months after surgery. A new graft should not be used for 3 to 6 weeks.

What should I do after surgery?

Exercise that brings more blood flow to the arm can help a fistula to work better. Squeezing a rubber ball many times a day can help the fistula mature, or become ready to use.

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**How can I keep my access working?**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>How can I prevent it?</th>
<th>What should I ask?</th>
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| I want to avoid infection.   | • Keep your access clean.  
  • Be sure your access is washed with antibacterial soap and iodine or alcohol before it is used for dialysis.  
  • Tell the nurse if your access is warm, red, has pus, or you have a fever.                                                                                           | • How should I clean my access?  
  • Do I need to cover my access in the bathtub or shower?  
  • Can I swim in a pool or a lake?  
  • Who should I call if I have an access problem?                                                                                                                                                           |
| I want to avoid blockage.    | • Learn how to feel the **thrill** (vibration) and listen for the **bruit** (buzzing) in your access. Tell the nurse if the thrill or bruit changes.  
  • Tell the nurse if your hand is cold, blue, numb, painful, or hard to move.                                                                                                                                  | • Can my doctor or nurse tell that my access is not working well? How do they know?  
  • If my access is blocked, can it be fixed? How?                                                                                                                                                                 |
| I don’t want to injure my access. | • Learn how needle sites are rotated on your access. Be sure the right site is used at each treatment.  
  • Do not carry heavy weights across the access.  
  • Avoid pressure on the access during sleep.  
  • Avoid tight clothing.  
  • Do not allow blood pressure or blood draws from this arm.                                                                                                                                                 | • What is the needle rotation pattern for my access?  
  • How much weight can I carry safely after surgery? When can I carry more?  
  • Can I wear a watch or hang a purse over my access arm?  
  • How can I avoid sleeping on my access arm?                                                                                                                                                                     |

**Where can I get more information about vascular access?**


- *Understanding your hemodialysis access options*. To request a free copy, call the American Association of Kidney Patients (AAKP) at (800) 749-AAKP or visit their website at www.aakp.org.