Care of Your Arteriovenous Fistula
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What is a fistula?
An arteriovenous fistula is the preferred vascular access for long-term hemodialysis. It is preferred because of its low risk of infection and complications compared to other types of dialysis access.

A fistula gives access to your bloodstream for hemodialysis. It is made by joining an artery and a vein during surgery.

Blood flows much faster and stronger in the arteries than it does in the veins. When an artery and a vein are joined, blood from the artery makes the vein swell and get larger.

Blood flowing through the fistula creates a bruit, which is a buzzing or swooshing sound and a thrill. You can feel the thrill when you touch your arm.

The fistula is made in the forearm, the bend of the elbow, or above the elbow. Your surgeon will check your veins before surgery and decide where to create the fistula.

It is recommended that a fistula be created at least 6 months before it is needed for dialysis.
When is my fistula ready to use?

• Your fistula should be checked after 2-3 weeks by your surgeon or nephrologist (kidney doctor), or by a nurse who specializes in using fistulas.

• It usually takes 8 weeks for the fistula to develop properly, so it’s ready to be used for dialysis.

• If the fistula is ready to have needles inserted into the enlarged vein, the fistula can be used to connect you to a dialysis machine.
After your surgery

• Keep your arm raised up on a pillow as much as possible. This helps to reduce swelling.
• After surgery, your fistula incision (cut) should be cleaned with normal saline (salt water). Apply new dry dressings as needed.
• If you have Steri-Strips® (long tape-like strips), they should fall off on their own in about 5-7 days.
• If you have stitches, they should be removed in 14-21 days. Check with your doctor. Your stitches may dissolve and may not need to be removed.

Exercising your arm after surgery

• An exercise routine may help you to get your fistula ready.
• Start exercising after your stitches are removed and the incision is well-healed.
• Use a rubber ball for about 5 minutes, 3 times each day:
  › Squeeze the ball and hold while you count to 10.
  › Release and repeat.
Do:

☑ Feel your fistula a few times each day to check for a thrill or bruit.
☑ Feel your fistula for a thrill if you have low blood pressure, a feeling of lightheadedness, or dizziness.
☑ Wear a MedicAlert® bracelet or necklace that states you have a fistula.
☑ If needed, use the back of your hand or the lowest part of the opposite arm for blood draws or intravenous (IV) infusions.
☑ Clean your fistula arm with soap and water before each hemodialysis treatment.
☑ Remove the Sureseal bandage or Band-Aid® 24 hours after your dialysis treatment.

Do not:

X Let anyone take your blood pressure or blood samples, or start an IV in your fistula arm.
X Wear tight clothing, jewelry, or a watch that could hinder the blood flow to your fistula.
X Sleep on the arm with your fistula.
X Bend your arm more than 90° for a long period of time.
X Use a razor on the arm with the fistula.
X Pick any scabs on the arm with the fistula.
Bleeding at your fistula site

• Apply firm pressure with 2 fingertips for 15 minutes. Do not check the fistula site for 15 minutes. After 15 minutes, check the fistula site to see if the bleeding has stopped.
• If bleeding has not stopped, keep applying pressure with 2 fingertips as above.
• Check your pulse to make sure you can still feel it while you are applying pressure.
• Do not apply a pressure dressing, as this may hinder the blood flow to your fistula.
• If the bleeding does not stop, keep applying pressure with your fingers. Go to the nearest Emergency Department, call your doctor, or call 911.

Call your doctor or go to an Emergency Department if you have:

› Redness, drainage, bleeding, or tenderness at the incision site.
› No bruit or thrill.
› Swelling, tingling, or numbness in your hand or arm.
› Fever or chills.