



Patient & Family Guide

2026

Dialysis for Acute Kidney Failure



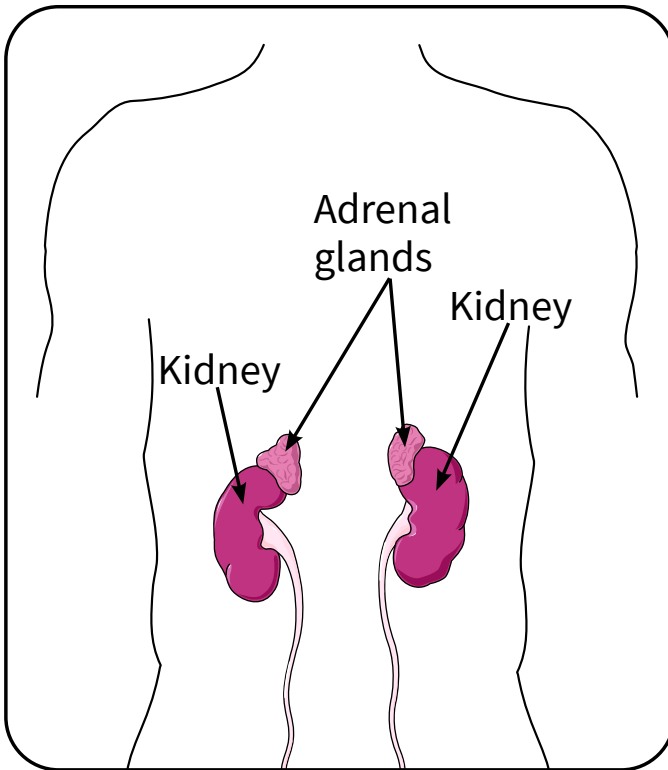
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Acute Hemodialysis

What do the kidneys do?

Your kidneys filter (remove) waste from your blood. They also:

- › Make hormones that affect your blood pressure, calcium levels, and red blood cells
- › Balance the amount of water in your body by keeping or removing water, as needed
- › Balance the electrolyte and mineral levels in your body



What is acute kidney failure?

- Acute kidney failure is when your kidneys stop working suddenly (very fast and with no warning).
- Kidney failure can be caused by:
 - › Shock
 - › Trauma
 - › An accident
 - › Medication
 - › A blockage
 - › A heart problem
 - › An infection
 - › Other health problems
- When your kidneys stop working, they no longer filter your blood. Over time, your kidneys may start working again, or they may not.

What are the symptoms of acute kidney failure?

- If your kidneys stop working, waste products and water will build up in your blood. You may have some or all of these symptoms:
 - › Feeling very tired
 - › Weakness
 - › Nausea (upset stomach)
 - › Vomiting (throwing up)
 - › Not feeling hungry
 - › Bad taste in your mouth

- › Itchy skin
- › Trouble sleeping
- › Trouble remembering
- › Shortness of breath
- › Swelling in your hands, arms, legs, feet, or other areas of your body
- Waste buildup in your blood may also cause:
 - › Changes in your blood pressure
 - › Abnormal blood work results, like higher electrolytes (like potassium, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, sodium), lower red blood cells, and higher waste products (like urea and creatinine)

What is peritoneal dialysis?

- Peritoneal dialysis (PD) is a way to filter your blood and remove fluid from your body. A surgeon will put a catheter (thin, hollow tube) filled with a special fluid into your abdomen (stomach area).
- PD can be done at home once:
 - › The catheter site is fully healed
 - › Your health care team teaches you how to do it

- When your kidneys stop working suddenly, you may not be able to do PD at home. This may be because:
 - › You are too sick to learn how to do it
 - › You are too weak to do it

What is hemodialysis?

- Hemodialysis is a treatment where a machine filters and removes waste and extra water from your blood.
- Your nephrologist (kidney doctor) will write a dialysis prescription for your treatment. This prescription is based on your blood work results and the fluid buildup in your body.
- Dialysis nurses will give you your treatment in either:
 - › Your room on the Intensive Care Unit (ICU)
 - › A hospital unit (you will be taken to this unit in your hospital bed)
- Your doctor will put a special line (called a **hemodialysis catheter**) into your bloodstream (see page 6).

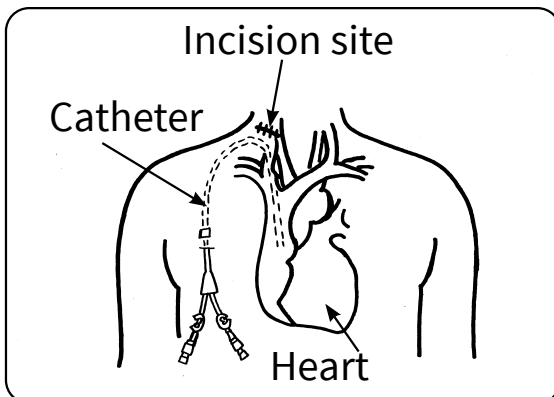
- During the treatment, your blood leaves your body and goes through the catheter into a dialysis machine. It goes through a filter called a **dialyzer**. The dialyzer cleans your blood and returns it to your body.
- You may also need to take certain medications (like supplements, blood pressure medications) to help get your blood back to normal.

What will happen at my hemodialysis appointments?

- At each treatment, your health care team will check your blood pressure, pulse, and temperature. They will also weigh you before and after each treatment.
- You will have blood work done. Your health care team will decide your dialysis needs based on your blood work results.
- Each treatment will last about 4 to 5 hours. This may be different for each person.

What is a hemodialysis catheter?

- Your health care team will use a catheter to move blood in and out of your body.
- Your doctor will put a catheter into a large vein in your neck or chest. If these veins cannot be used, they will put the catheter through your groin into a large vein in your leg.
- You will have 2 stitches at the insertion site (where the catheter enters your body) to hold the catheter in place.
- You will see a tube coming from the insertion site. This tube splits into 2 tubes, making a “Y” shape.
- These tubes connect your catheter to the dialysis machine:
 - › 1 tube moves blood from your body to the dialysis machine, where it is filtered and extra water is removed from your blood, if needed.
 - › The other tube brings the filtered blood back to your body



- The catheter tubes are covered with a waterproof dressing. This is to prevent:
 - › Infections
 - › The catheter from being pulled on
- There are 2 types of catheters used in hemodialysis treatment:
 - › A **non-tunneled** catheter is used for shorter periods of time. It can be put in by a doctor while you are in bed. You will need an X-ray once it has been put in.
 - › A **tunneled** catheter is put in by a radiologist (a doctor who specializes in reading medical images like X-rays and ultrasounds) in the Interventional Radiology Department. You will be taken there in your bed or by wheelchair. A tunneled catheter can be safely used for weeks or months.

How often will I need hemodialysis?

- When your kidneys stop working, waste products can build up in your blood fast. You may need hemodialysis 3 times a week or more.

How long will I be on hemodialysis?

- How long you will need hemodialysis depends on whether your kidneys heal or not. Your health care team will monitor how well your kidneys are working.

- If you will need hemodialysis long-term, you can be discharged home and come to the Dialysis Unit for treatments.

Living with kidney disease

- Hemodialysis can be hard for you and your support person(s). While you are on hemodialysis, you may:
 - › Change what you eat and drink, or follow an eating plan
 - › Take a new medication(s)
 - › Start or stop certain activities
- You may feel helpless, angry, or not sure of what to do. It can take time to get used to the physical and mental changes that may happen with hemodialysis treatment. This is common.
- Your health care team is here to help and support you. Your team includes:
 - › Nurses
 - › Nurse practitioners
 - › Nephrologists
 - › Pharmacists
 - › Drug access navigators
 - › Dietitians
 - › Social workers
 - › Peer support volunteers
 - › Spiritual care workers

If you have any questions, talk to a member of your health care team, like your pharmacist, nurse practitioner, nurse, or doctor.

Resources

- **The Kidney Foundation of Canada:**
 - › <https://kidney.ca/>
- **Living with Kidney Failure, 6th Edition:**
 - › <https://kidney.ca/en/kidney-health/resources/handbooks-and-brochures/living-with-kidney-failure?search=living%20with%20kidney%20failure>
- If you would like a paper copy of this pamphlet, ask your nurse.

- If you or your support person(s) would like more information on dialysis options (like PD), ask the modality selection nurse:
 - › Phone: 902-473-7578
- Please leave a message with your name and phone number, and the nurse will call you back.

Notes:

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

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Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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