



Patient & Family Guide
2022

Care of Your Arteriovenous Fistula



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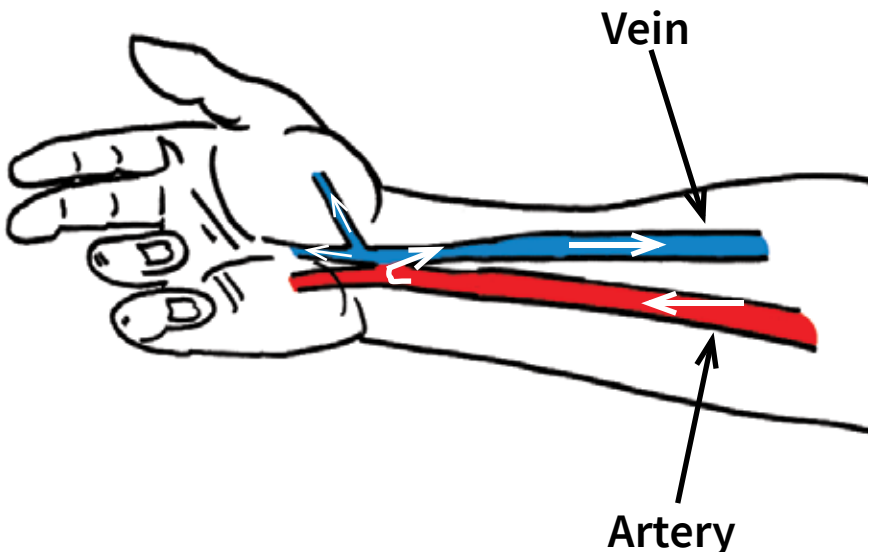
What is a fistula?

- A fistula is made by joining an artery and a vein during surgery. It gives access to your bloodstream for hemodialysis.
- An arteriovenous fistula is the preferred vascular access (the place on your body where blood flows from and returns to your body during hemodialysis) for long-term hemodialysis. It is preferred because of its low risk of infection and complications compared to other types of dialysis access.
- 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 (a buzzing or swooshing sound), and a thrill (vibration). You can feel the thrill when you touch your arm.
- The fistula is made in your forearm, the bend of your elbow, or above your 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 will be needed for dialysis.

When will my fistula be ready to use?

- Your fistula should be checked 2 to 3 weeks after surgery. This can be done by your surgeon or nephrologist (kidney doctor), or by a nurse who specializes in fistulas.
- It usually takes 8 weeks (2 months) for the fistula to develop properly, so that it can be used for dialysis.
- If the fistula is ready to have needles inserted, it 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 will help to lower swelling.
- Clean your fistula incision (cut) with 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 to 7 days.
- If you have stitches, they should be removed in 2 to 3 weeks. Check with your primary health care provider. Your stitches may dissolve (go away on their own) 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.**
- Using a small rubber ball that you can hold in your hand, do this exercise 3 times a day, for about 5 minutes:
 - › Squeeze the ball and hold while you count to 10.
 - › Release and repeat.

How to care for your fistula:

- Wear a MedicAlert® bracelet or necklace that states you have a fistula.
- Feel your fistula a few times a day to check for a thrill or if you can hear a bruit (low murmur).
- Feel your fistula for a thrill if you have low blood pressure, or feel lightheaded, or dizzy.
- Use the back of your hand or the lowest part of your opposite arm if you need to have blood drawn or an intravenous (IV).
- Clean your fistula arm with soap and water before each hemodialysis treatment.
- Remove the SURESEAL® bandage or Band-Aid® 24 hours (1 day) after your dialysis treatment.
- **Do not** let anyone take your blood pressure or blood samples, or start an IV in your fistula arm.
- **Do not** wear tight clothing, jewelry, or a watch that could affect the blood flow to your fistula.
- **Do not** sleep on your fistula arm.
- **Do not** bend your fistula arm more than 90° for a long period of time (a few minutes).
- **Do not** use a razor on your fistula arm.
- **Do not** pick any scabs on your fistula arm.

If you have bleeding at the fistula site:

- Press firmly on the site 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 the bleeding has not stopped, keep applying pressure with 2 fingertips as above.
- Check your pulse to make sure you are not pressing too hard/stopping blood flow to your hand.
- **Do not** apply a pressure dressing. This may make it hard for the blood to flow to your fistula.
- **If the bleeding does not stop, keep applying pressure with your fingertips. Call your primary health care provider or 911, or go to the nearest Emergency Department right away.**

Call your primary health care provider or 911, or go to the nearest Emergency Department right away if you have:

- › Redness, drainage, bleeding, or tenderness at the fistula site
- › No thrill or bruit
- › Swelling, tingling, or numbness in your fistula hand or arm
- › Fever above 38.5⁰ C/101.3⁰ F or chills

