



Using Your Vascular Access for Dialysis

Getting a vascular access is one step along the way to living with kidney failure. Using the access for dialysis is another step. Fistulas and grafts are similar in the way needles are used, so in this section we'll talk about them together. We'll also talk about dialysis with a catheter. Even though you have already had dialysis with your access, you may still learn something new in this section. So, let's walk through the next step.

The idea of someone putting needles into your new access for dialysis can be scary! But think about this: as of 2001, the most recent year for statistics, more than 264,000 Americans were on hemodialysis. This means that a lot of people were able to get used to the needles. You will be able to, too.

Once your access has been placed, the doctor or nurse will keep an eye on it and decide when it seems ready to use. After your fistula or graft surgery, be sure to tell the doctor right away if your hand or arm feels:

- Cold
- Numb
- Painful

This can mean that your hand is not getting enough blood—a rare complication that is more common in people with diabetes.

A fistula is, ideally, mature and ready to use after 3 to 4 months. A graft is usually mature and ready to use after 3 to 6 weeks.

Step 1: Hand washing

The first step in using an access is for the staff person to wash his or her hands. This is important

every, single time. Hand washing and gloves are required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). They protect both you and your care team member.

Make sure that whoever puts needles in your access washes his/her hands and puts on fresh gloves. Your unit will teach you how to wash your access arm. Even if you have taken a shower before coming to the unit, you should wash your arm before your treatment.

Step 2: Look for infection

The second step in using a vascular access is to look at the access very closely. At each dialysis, your nurse or technician will look for signs of infection or damage to the access. These include:

- Redness
- Warmth
- Tenderness
- Pus or open sores
- Swelling
- Ballooning of the access (aneurysm)

Putting needles through infected tissue can be dangerous for you. Harmful bacteria could be pushed into your bloodstream by the needles.

Keep Your Access Visible at Dialysis!

When you are at dialysis, keep your access uncovered all the time so the staff can see it. This way, if a needle slips out, or a line comes apart, the staff will know right away. Even if you're cold, make sure your access can always be seen!