

Tips for Primary Fistula Care

Fistula Care Tips

A primary or simple fistula is an opening between one of your arteries and veins. The pressure from your artery makes the veins larger so they are big enough to be used as an access for hemodialysis.

It is important to keep your primary fistula healthy and working well. Please remember the following tips.

- Do not let anyone — other than a dialysis nurse — do any of the following to your fistula arm.
 - put a blood pressure cuff or tourniquet on
 - draw blood
 - start an intravenous (IV) line.
- You may use a tourniquet on your fistula arm to do your fistula exercise. The exercise will help make your veins larger so they can be used for dialysis. **Follow your doctor's directions.**
- If you do not feel a thrill or hear a bruit, the fistula may be clotted. Call your doctor or dialysis unit.
- A dressing will usually be left over the fistula for 1 to 2 days after surgery. Remove the dressing after that time. The incision lines are healed enough after 2 days so you don't need a dressing.
- Wash the incision line over the fistula every day. Use clean soap and water, rinse with clean water, and pat dry with a clean towel.
- Call your surgeon or doctor as soon as possible if you have any of the following:
 - swelling, redness or drainage from the incision site
 - increased pain, fever, bruising or bleeding from the incision site
 - pale or discolored hand of the fistula arm
 - numbness.
- If you have bleeding, apply direct pressure over the site with a folded 4-inch by 4-inch clean cloth. Hold pressure for 5 to 10 minutes before checking the area.
 - If the bleeding doesn't stop after you apply pressure for 30 minutes, call your doctor.
 - If the bleeding doesn't stop while you apply pressure, call 911 or have someone take you to a hospital Emergency Department.
- Follow up with your doctor or nephrologist as directed.

Keep The Fistula From Clotting

- Do not let anyone, other than the dialysis nurse, do the following to your fistula arm:
 - put on a blood pressure cuff or tourniquet
 - draw blood
 - start an intravenous (IV) line.
- Do not wear clothing that has tight sleeves or elastic around your upper arm.
- Do not wear tight jewelry (including a watch) on your fistula arm.
- Do not sleep on your fistula arm.
- Do not carry heavy objects (including a purse or briefcase) on your fistula arm.

Fistula Exercise

You can help the fistula develop by using your fistula arm for normal activities. There are also special exercises you can do.

Begin doing the following exercises about 10 to 14 days after surgery, or as directed by your doctor.

- Check the thrill (fistula vibration) for intensity. Palpitate (gently tap) the vibrating sensation over the fistula site. If the thrill is present, the fistula is working well.

— If you do not feel a thrill, the fistula may be clotted. Call your doctor or dialysis unit.

- Put a tourniquet high on your upper arm. Make the tourniquet tight so you can see the veins (make them “pop out”). Do not make it so tight that it affects the strength of the thrill or causes your hand or arm to tingle or feel numb.
- With the tourniquet on, keep your hand lower than your heart. Open and close your hand many times by squeezing a rubber ball, washcloth or sponge.
- Do this exercise for either:
 - 10 times a day for 10 minutes
 - 5 times a day for 20 minutes
 - as directed by your surgeon.
- Remove the tourniquet.

If you feel pressure or discomfort when you first begin doing the exercise, shorten the time the tourniquet is on. Slowly work your way up to leaving it on for 10 to 20 minutes.

In 3 to 6 weeks of regular exercise, the fistula will be ready to use. The more exercise you do, the sooner the fistula will develop.