Care of Your Arteriovenous Fistula

What is a fistula?

A fistula gives access to your blood stream for hemodialysis. It is made by joining a vein and artery. The fistula is usually made in the forearm but may be at the bend of the elbow or above the elbow. Blood flows much faster and stronger in the arteries than it does in the veins. When an artery and vein are joined, blood from the artery causes the vein to swell and become larger. The fistula will be assessed after about 6-8 weeks. 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.

Day-to-day care of your fistula

Care of your incision

- As much as possible, keep your arm elevated on a pillow. This helps to reduce swelling.

- After surgery, your fistula incision should be cleaned with normal saline. Apply a new dry dressing as needed.

- If you have Steri-Strips® (long tape-like strips), they should fall off in about 5-7 days. Do not peel the strips off yourself.

- If you have stitches, they should be removed in 10 -14 days. Check with your doctor. Your stitches may dissolve and do not need to be removed.
Exercising your arm after surgery

• If your fistula develops properly, it should be ready to use in about 6-8 weeks. An exercise routine may help you to get your fistula ready.

• Start your exercises after the stitches are removed (check with your nurse) and the incision is well healed. Use a rubber ball for about 5 minutes, 3 times each day. Squeeze the ball, hold while you count to 10. Release and repeat.

Do not:

• Let anyone take your blood pressure, blood samples or start an intravenous in your fistula arm.

• Wear tight clothing (blouses with elastic) or jewellery (tight watches) that could hinder the blood flowing to your fistula.

• Sleep on the arm with your fistula.

• Bend your arm more than 90° for a long period of time.

• Use a razor on the arm with the fistula.

• Pick any scabs on the arm with the fistula.

Do:

• You must clean your fistula arm with soap and water before each hemodialysis treatment.

• Feel your fistula a few times each day to check for a 'thrill’ or bruit. A thrill or bruit is a buzzing feeling on the skin above the fistula. In addition, it is very important if you have low blood pressure, a feeling of lightheadedness and/or dizziness to check your ‘thrill’ or bruit.

• Wear a MedicAlert® bracelet or necklace that states you have a fistula.

• Remove the Sureseal/Band-Aid® 24 hours after your dialysis treatment.
Call your doctor or go to an Emergency Department at any time if you have:

• Redness, drainage, bleeding, or tenderness at the incision.
• Absence of bruit or ‘thrill’.
• Swelling, tingling, or numbness in your hand or arm.
• Fever or chills.

**Bleeding at fistula site**

• Apply firm pressure with your 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.

• Check your pulse to make sure it can still be felt while you are applying pressure.

• Do not apply a dressing as this may hinder the blood flow to your fistula.

• If the bleeding does not stop, continue to apply pressure with your fingers. Go to the nearest Emergency Department or call your doctor or call 911.
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