

Your Care at Home: Caring for Your Urinary Catheter

You're about to leave the hospital with a little something extra, a urinary catheter. You might be concerned about the device and how to care for it at home. My friend and I will help you through that with some tips so that you can prevent irritation and infection of your catheter.

A urinary catheter is a sterile tube inserted through your urethra, the opening from your bladder to the outside, to drain urine when you can't do it yourself. The catheter has a small balloon filled with fluid that holds it in place inside you.

One of the first things you'll need to know when you get home is how you make sure your catheter is working. First, check the tubing several times a day. If there are any kinks, straighten them out and move the tubing around to make sure it's draining. Always keep your catheter bag below your waist and don't let it touch the floor. Never sit or lie on the tubing and be sure it's not in the way as you're walking, so that no one, including your pet, can trip on it.

Do not disconnect the catheter any more than you absolutely need to. Drink a lot of water, unless your healthcare team has told you otherwise. This helps keep your urine flowing. If you're taking any medicines, follow the directions carefully.

You should clean your catheter daily or more often if needed. You'll need a clean washcloth and hand towel, some mild soap and warm water and a clean container or sink. First, wash your hands well with soap and water, making sure to clean between your fingers and under your nails. If someone else is caring for you, they should also wash their hands and use medical gloves.

Next, wet a washcloth with warm water and soap it up. Gently wash all around the area where the catheter goes in. Females should wipe from front to back. Males should wipe from the tip of the penis toward the body. Rinse the washcloth well and then add some more soap. Now, gently wash your upper legs and buttocks. Rinse and pat dry with a clean towel. You may use a water-based lubricant in the area where the catheter is inserted. Do not use a petroleum jelly or other creams, powders, or sprays near this area.

Attaching your catheter to your body makes you more comfortable and helps prevent infection. Whether you use a catheter strap or tape, make sure it's not too tight or so loose that it won't stay in place. Women, attach your catheter to one of your thighs. And, men? Attach your catheter to your abdomen or thigh.

You should empty the drainage bag when it gets half to two-thirds full. Don't let it fill completely because this can irritate your urethra, and increase the chance for backflow or for the bag to split open and leak.

Start by washing your hands really well with soap and water. If someone is helping you, they must also wash their hands and use medical gloves. Hold the drainage tube over the toilet. Unclamp the tube and let the bag drain, being

Your Care at Home: Caring for Your Urinary Catheter

careful not to touch the tip of the drainage tube or let it touch the toilet. Once the bag is empty, clean the tip of the drainage tube with an alcohol swab. Finally, close the tube.

You may need to change your catheter every few weeks. Your doctor or nurse will do this for you or teach you how to do this. Perhaps the most common and serious problem with catheters is the risk of infection. It's important to know the less you open or disconnect your drainage bag, the less chance you'll have for a urinary tract infection.

Call your doctor if you have any signs of an infection: your urine smells bad, or is cloudy or a different color, fever or chills, pain around your sides, lower back or near your catheter, a burning sensation or pain in your bladder or pelvis, or maybe you just don't feel right, you're tired, achy, or have a hard time focusing.

Also, call your doctor if: your urine bag is filling up more quickly than usual, urine is leaking around the catheter, you notice blood, grit, or stones in your urine or any change in its color, or your catheter seems blocked.

Don't be afraid to call your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about taking care of your catheter. I know this may seem like a lot to handle, but, with practice, you'll get the hang of it.