

Living With Your Fistula For Hemodialysis

Anyone receiving hemodialysis has to take special care of their fistula...the "lifeline" that connects their blood to the machine that cleans it when their kidneys are failing. That includes watching for signs of infection

"For the dialysis access, you want them to look at their arm when they're washing it. Is it the skin all intact or do you have a cut or a sore? Does it look like skin is shiny? Do you have any pain? Is it red? Is it tender?"

- Judy Geissler, Dialysis Nurse

"Redness around your fistula area, any warmth around that area, painful to touch. A big thing is a fever. If you have any type of fever right after dialysis, you're asked to go to the emergency room." – Rogelio, Patient

Rogelio Garcia knows a thing or two about caring for a fistula. He's been on hemodialysis for years.

"Some of the things that we're asked to be careful of our fistula area is to not put any pressure around that meaning in tight fitting clothing, in any type of wristbands armbands." Rogelio, Patient

Other tips for avoiding pressure on your fistula, to keep it working longer:

- Don't carry anything heavy
- Don't sleep with your head on the arm with the fistula, and
- Don't let anyone use that arm to draw blood or check your blood pressure

Monitor your fistula at home several times a day, to make sure the blood is flowing well. You're feeling for vibration, known as "thrill" and listening for a buzzing noise, called "bruit."

"Look, listen, feel. Sometimes they can place their hand on it and then just feel for that there. They can put their ear, put their access to their ear, make sure they can hear it." – Justin Martin, Hemodialysis Technician

"You will hear a buzzing. And there's a French word known as "bruit." That French word is translated as noise. So we tell patients, listen for the noise that the fistula or graft makes. And if there's a change, will call us and we'll intervene." - Dr. Allan Roza, Vascular Access Surgeon

One critical thing to watch for after dialysis, is bleeding. Normally, after leaving the dialysis unit, there should not be any bleeding. If this happens you need to call 9-1-1 or get yourself to the nearest emergency room.

"There's a lot of blood going through this conduit at a very high rate of speed. And if there's a break in the system, it's not a drip, drip. It's a gush. And it can be a life threatening bleed. If that occurs, simple pressure will stop the bleeding but it needs surgical attention then and there." - Dr. Allan Roza, Vascular Access Surgeon

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The more a kidney patient knows about their fistula, their dialysis, their disease, the better.

"Day to day, there's not a lot that they have to do in terms of maintenance or guarding of the arm. It's only while they're on dialysis and once it's being accessed and following the removal of the needles that's sort of the critical points. But off dialysis, patients are quite functional." - Dr. Allan Roza, Vascular Access Surgeon

"They can go on vacation, believe it or not, to another dialysis unit and they can tell the nurse or the tech that's taking care of them 'this is my fistula. (edit) This is how I know my access is working.' So if your patient is educated they're their best advocate if they have to go someplace else for dialysis."

- Judy Geissler, Dialysis Nurse

Caring for your fistula, and watching for any changes or signs of infection, will make it easier for you to live the life you want.