



Your Urinary Catheter

What is a urinary catheter?

A urinary catheter is a tube that is passed into your bladder. The catheter is put in to allow urine (pee) from your bladder to drain out into a bag. You could have a catheter put in for many different reasons.

Sometimes it is done because you can't pass urine for some reason. (This is called 'retention').

Another reason could be that urine is leaking out all the time (This is called 'incontinence').

Sometimes a catheter is put in for a short time to manage the flow of urine during surgery. In some cases, it can be put in to measure how much urine you are making when you are very sick. If you are not sure why you have a catheter, please ask your nurse or doctor. They will be happy to talk to you about it.

Can I get an infection from a urinary catheter?

Having a urinary catheter put in means that there is a tube with one end inside your bladder and the other end hanging outside your body going into a bag. As long as this tube is in place there is a risk that bacteria (bugs) can travel along the tube and get into your bladder. If the catheter has to stay in for a few weeks or longer, it is almost certain that bacteria will get into your bladder. If the bugs just stay in your bladder, this will often do no harm. Sometimes you might have discomfort or pain in the lower part of your tummy. Sometimes you can get some inflammation or infection near where the tube comes out. This can cause discomfort or pain and there can be pus or blood.

The main risk of infection with a urinary catheter is if the bugs growing in the bladder spread up to the kidneys or into the blood. This can make you very sick and you may feel shivery, have a temperature and feel very weak. If this happens, tell your nurse or doctor straight away.

Can you protect me from urinary catheter infection?

Even with the best possible care, there is always a risk of infection with a urinary catheter. The risk is higher for people who have the catheter in for a long time, and in people who are very vulnerable to infection.

The most important thing to reduce the risk of infection is that people should only get a urinary catheter if they really need one. The catheter should be taken out as soon as it is no longer needed. If you have a urinary catheter, it is good to ask why you have it and how long you are



going to need it for. Some people cannot manage without a urinary catheter for a long time (weeks or months). If someone really needs a catheter and there is no other way to manage their condition, then the risk of serious infection cannot be completely avoided.

The risk of infection from a catheter is reduced if the opening where the catheter goes in and the skin around it is cleaned carefully before the catheter goes in. Infection is less likely to happen if the doctor or nurse putting in the catheter is careful about cleaning their hands beforehand. It is OK to remind people to clean their hands when they're caring for you.

Also, the risk of infection from a catheter is reduced if everyone who touches the catheter or the bag carries out hand hygiene before they touch it. Again, it is OK to remind people to clean their hands when they're caring for you.

Will I avoid infection if I take antibiotics while I have the catheter?

If you get a serious kidney infection or blood infection from the catheter, you will need a course of antibiotic treatment for that infection. However, staying on antibiotics all the time is usually not a good idea. If you stay on antibiotics all the time, your bladder will often get taken over by bacteria that are resistant to the antibiotics.

If this happens, it will be harder to find a good antibiotic to treat you if you get a kidney or blood infection. Also, staying on antibiotics for a long time often causes diarrhoea or thrush and can have other serious side effects. In most patients with a catheter, taking antibiotics for a long time is more likely to do harm than good.

Should I have a urine test to see if I have an infection?

There is usually no value in doing a urine test unless you are feeling sick and your doctor thinks that you have a kidney infection or a blood infection. If you have a catheter in for a long time, the urine test will almost always be positive. This does not mean you have an infection – it just means there are bacteria in your bladder. It is almost always safer to leave the bugs alone if they are not making you sick at the time.

Watch out for these signs and tell nurses and doctors if :

- you have soreness or pain in your tummy or where the catheter comes out;
- you start shivering or get a high temperature or suddenly feel very unwell.



Further information

Please do not hesitate to ask the healthcare staff caring for you if you have any questions. Information on hand hygiene, infection control and managing superbugs at home is available on www.hse.ie/infectioncontrol or on www.hpsc.ie

This information is approved for use by the HSE's Antimicrobial Resistance and Infection Control national programme. Text awarded Plain English mark from the National Adult Literacy Agency

Published: January 2019