

What Is a Catheter?

A catheter is a thin, flexible tube that can put fluids into your body or take them out.

Medical catheters are tubes that can be inserted into a body cavity, vessel or duct, usually to allow for the administration of fluids, medications or gases or to drain fluids or urine from the body.

Types of catheters

1. Urinary Catheters

Urinating (peeing) is a basic function that we all must do several times per day. It helps to remove wastes and fluid from your body. If you're having trouble peeing on your own, you may need a catheter. Catheters are also used to remove the urine from your body before having some types of surgery. The type of catheter and the length of time you will need one depend on your health status.

Types of Urinary Catheters

Depending on your health and how long you'll need help peeing, your doctor might recommend:

- **Foley catheter.** This kind stays put. A tiny balloon filled with water keeps one end inside your bladder. The other end drains out into a bag that's either strapped to your leg or hanging from the side of a bed or a stand. The bag is emptied when it's full. A Foley catheter needs to be replaced every 3 months or so.
- **Intermittent catheters.** You use one of these several times a day, either at scheduled times or whenever your bladder feels full. It usually goes in through your urethra (the tube that takes urine from your bladder out of your body) and drains your bladder. Your doctor or nurse will teach you how to put it in and take it out.
- **Suprapubic catheter.** Your doctor puts this type into your bladder through a cut in your belly, a little below your belly button. It isn't as likely to give you an infection.

Urinary Catheter Side Effects

There are a few things to watch for when you use any type of urinary catheter.

Infection. This is the most common problem. The catheter may let germs into your body, where they can cause an infection of your bladder, urethra, urinary tract, or kidneys. Call your doctor if you:

- Feel pain in your belly or groin
- Have a fever or chills
- Feel suddenly confused

Leaks. This may be a sign that your catheter is blocked by clotted blood or debris. Tell your doctor if you see blood clots in your urine or you think something is blocking the flow of urine.

2. Intravenous Catheters

These give you medicine or fluids straight into your bloodstream. It's also called an IV. There are two kinds:

- **Peripheral venous catheter.** If you need an IV for a short time, you'll probably have this type, which is connected to a vein in your hand, forearm, or foot. This is the simplest, least expensive kind. It can stay in up for to 4 days before your nurse has to replace it. If it's there longer, it might irritate your vein or cause other problems.
- **Central venous catheter.** If you need medicine for a longer time, you'll probably get this type of catheter, which goes into your neck, leg, arm, or the top of your chest and is connected to one of the large blood veins that go in and out of your heart.

It can stay in for months or even years. The doctor might recommend one if:

- Need intravenous medicine for a long time. A large vein can handle a catheter better than a small one. If you need chemotherapy, you'll probably have this kind of catheter.
- Need IV medicine as an outpatient. These catheters are less likely to come out, so you can be more active between treatments.
- Need a lot of medicine or blood quickly.
- Doctor wants to measure the blood pressure in one of your large veins.
- Doctor needs samples of your blood several times a day. With this, the nurses don't have to keep sticking you with a needle.
- When food needs to be given through mouth, stomach, or intestines, so the nutrients have to go directly into blood.

- When kidneys aren't working right. To take their place, your medical team will connect you to a dialysis machine, which cleans the waste material out of your blood.
- You need medicine that might hurt your skin or muscles if it leaks out. That's not as likely to happen with this kind of catheter.

Intravenous Catheter Complications

When your medical team puts a central venous catheter in, there's a small chance of a few issues:

- The catheter might injure the vein.
- Blood might leak out and cause a bruise or other problems. In most cases, the bleeding stops on its own.
- The catheter might cut your lung, which would make it collapse. If that happens, your medical team can reinflate your lung.
- Your heart might go off its normal rhythm. If so, it usually returns to normal by itself.