

# Peripherally inserted central catheter

**This information leaflet aims to help answer some of the questions you may have about your peripherally inserted central catheter (PICC line).**

**This information leaflet will explain why you need a PICC line, what to do before you come in for the procedure and how to care for it when you are at home. If you have any other questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to the nurse or doctor caring for you. Sometimes a district nurse may be required to help you look after your PICC line while you are at home.**

## What is a PICC line?

A PICC line is a long narrow flexible tube inserted into one of the veins of the arm. The length of the line depends on how tall you are and where the insertion site is. Usually, it is 38–52cm long. It has openings on both ends. The tip of the PICC line sits in a big vein just above your heart. The other end of the PICC line comes out of the arm by about 5cm. The hollow space inside the line is called a lumen. You may have a line with a single or double lumen. Not all patients are suitable for a PICC line and a nurse specialist or doctor will assess you before inserting the line.

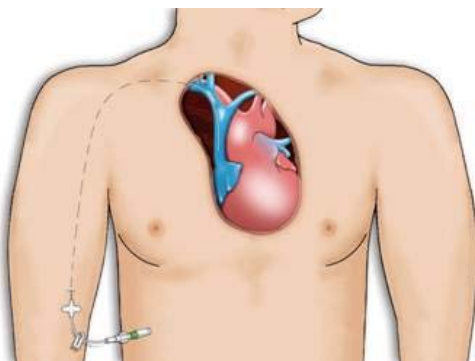


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## Why should I have a PICC line?

A PICC line can be used to allow medication, fluids, nutrition or antibiotics to be given intravenously (administered directly to a vein). In addition it can also be used to take blood samples which reduces the need for multiple needle punctures in the arm.

A PICC line is ideal for people with small veins or who are scared of needles, and especially for people who need to start intensive treatment immediately or are unable to have a different type of line because they are on blood thinning medication or unable to lie flat. It can be used for home treatment by a district nurse. If the line is cared for appropriately it can remain in place for six to eight months.

In summary, a PICC line can be used for:

- giving intravenous medicines
- giving chemotherapy or other irritating medications
- intravenous feeding
- giving blood and blood products like platelets
- taking blood samples.

## What are the risks?

Like other types of central lines, insertion of a PICC line carries a small risk of complications which are described below. The nurse specialist or doctor will explain these to you.

- **Infection** - there is a small risk of having an infection. This can happen anytime while the PICC line is in place.
- **Thrombus or clot** - this can form around the line. Patients who have blood clots often report having painful and swollen arms. You must let the nurse looking after you know if you get these symptoms so we can treat the clot immediately.
- **Malposition** - in some cases, the tip of the line may not be in the correct position. A chest X-ray is required to check the position and the nurse specialist or doctor may have to adjust the line accordingly.
- **Bleeding and bruising around the insertion site** - sometimes a small ooze of blood may be seen around the insertion site. Gentle pressure may be applied after the procedure to prevent bleeding, especially for patients with blood that does not clot normally.

This procedure is performed using a local anaesthetic. This is an injection used to numb part of your body so you can stay awake during the procedure but do not feel pain. Please refer to the leaflet **Having an anaesthetic** for more information. If you do not have a copy, please speak to a member of staff caring for you.

## What happens during the procedure?

The specialist nurse or doctor will scan your arm first with an ultrasound machine to see inside your arm. This will help determine the right size and type of vein to place the PICC line in. Your arm will be cleaned with antiseptic solution and covered with a sterile cloth. The nurse or doctor will then inject a local anaesthetic to numb the insertion site. You should not feel any pain during the procedure. However, you will feel some pressure on the insertion site while the specialist nurse or doctor is working. The procedure will take approximately 20–30 minutes.

A transparent, breathable dressing will be applied on the insertion site to secure the PICC line and a device known as a Statlock will also ensure the PICC line stays in place. A chest X-ray will be used to confirm that the tip of the PICC line is in the right position.

## What happens after the procedure?

Once the local anaesthetic wears off, you may feel some slight discomfort or ache in the arm where the PICC line was inserted. This is quite common. Most people do not need any pain relief, however, if required, you can take your usual painkillers (make sure you follow the instructions on the label). There may also be some bruising around the insertion site and blood on the dressing. This is nothing to worry about.

In some cases, there may be some tenderness or swelling around the insertion site. This is quite common, especially during the first week following the procedure. Make sure that you continue to move your arm normally and apply some warm pads on the insertion site as needed or until the reaction settles. However, if the pain and swelling persist, please ring the hospital (see the Contact Us box at the end of this leaflet) and we will assess your condition and give you the appropriate advice.

## How will I know if something is wrong with my PICC line?

Most PICC line insertions are trouble-free, but please contact us if you notice any of the following:

- bleeding from the insertion site
- a temperature of 38°C, fever and chills especially right after the line is flushed with saline
- leaking or cracked line
- pain and swelling of the arm, neck and chest
- the external visible length of the PICC line is longer than when first inserted
- redness and inflammation of the insertion site.

If you have any concerns, please do not hesitate to call us on the numbers provided (see the Contact Us box at the end of this leaflet).

## Who will look after my PICC line?

This will depend on whether you are an outpatient or inpatient. The nurses on the ward, the district nurses or a family member (who is willing to take care of the PICC line following appropriate training) will clean the insertion site and PICC line for you. They will also flush the PICC line with normal saline and change the transparent dressing. **This must be done on a weekly basis.**

## How will I look after the PICC line when I get home?

When you get home it is important that the transparent dressing is kept dry at all times. We will give you a plastic sleeve to use when you shower. When having a bath, make sure that the insertion site and the tip of the PICC line are not sitting in the water. This will prevent your PICC line from getting infected.

Also, you should avoid strenuous activities such as golf and tennis while the PICC line is in, as it can dislodge the PICC line or accidentally pull it out.

## How is the PICC line removed?

PICC lines can easily be removed. A nurse will remove the dressing and gently pull the line out. Compression will be applied for a few minutes to prevent bleeding. A small dressing is then applied over the site. There will be no bleeding or pain. The wound will heal naturally.

Care must be taken when washing and dressing as the wound must be kept dry during healing.

### Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your PICC line, please contact us Monday to Friday, 9am to 7pm on:

Guy's Interventional Radiology Department: 020 7188 5525  
St Thomas' Interventional Radiology Department: 020 7188 5477

Out of hours (Mon-Fri between 7pm and 8am and Saturday and Sunday) please contact your local accident and emergency department.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)

### Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

### Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

**t:** 020 7188 8801 (PALS)      **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)  
**t:** 020 7188 3514 (complaints)      **e:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

### Language Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

**t:** 020 7188 8815      **e:** [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

### NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

**t:** 111

### NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

**w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

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