

Caring for your arteriovenous fistula (AVF) or arteriovenous graft (AVG) at home

Following surgery you will have been given information about how to look after your AVF or AVG immediately after the operation. This leaflet explains how to care for your AVF or AVG at home, and applies to all kidney patients with an AVF or an AVG. If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is an AVF?

This is where a surgeon performs an operation to connect an artery (a blood vessel carrying blood from the heart around the body) directly to a vein (a blood vessel carrying blood back to the heart). This is usually done at the wrist or elbow. This causes more blood to flow through the vein. As a result, the vein grows larger and stronger. This makes it possible to repeatedly insert the needles required for haemodialysis treatment.

What is an AVG?

This is where a surgeon performs an operation to insert a piece of synthetic tubing under the skin to join the artery and vein. This makes it possible to repeatedly insert the needles required for haemodialysis treatment.

Looking after my AVF or AVG

You can take care of your AVF or AVG by following these steps:

- Check your fistula or graft daily for a 'buzzing' sensation known as a 'thrill'. This 'thrill' is caused by the high flow of blood through the fistula or graft, and is a sign that it is working well. If you do not know how to check for the "thrill", please ask the nurses looking after you. If you cannot feel the 'thrill', let your nursing team know straight away.
- Do not let any medical professionals take blood from your fistula or graft arm. Blood should always be taken from the veins on the backs of your hands. Please let staff know this if you are having blood taken.

- Never let anyone check your blood pressure on the fistula or graft arm.
- Do not wear any tight sleeves or watches that may restrict the flow of blood through your fistula or graft arm.
- Be careful not to lie on your fistula or graft arm.
- Do not loop shopping bags over your fistula or graft.
- At the end of dialysis the needles will be removed and a plaster will be placed over the needle site, this plaster can be removed later in the day or the next day, occasionally the fistula or graft may bleed a little. If this happens, you should apply pressure, and the bleeding should stop. If the bleeding does not stop, please contact us immediately (please see advice below for **heavy bleeding**).

What should I do if I have a problem?

Once you are having dialysis and having your fistula or graft needed, occasionally complications can develop. You should report any of the following changes to your dialysis nurses quickly so that they can assess your fistula for you.

Bruising or swelling

This can occur due to the needle piercing the wall of the fistula or graft, causing swelling or bruising. This is less likely to occur as the fistula or graft matures.

Infection

If you experience any redness, pain, swelling or heat around your fistula or graft, **tell the dialysis nurses immediately**, as this could be a sign of infection.

Aneurysm

This is a swollen area which can develop over time. This can be due to the needles being put in the same area. You (if you are self-needling) or your nurses should rotate your needling sites, if possible, to help avoid this (buttonhole needling can also help). If your skin becomes thin or shiny, or you can see a pulse under the skin in the aneurysmal area, **tell the dialysis nurses immediately.**

Allergies

If your fistula or graft becomes red or itchy after applying anaesthetic cream, or following cleaning or dressing application, tell the dialysis nurses as you may have an allergy to the cream or dressing.

Steal syndrome

This is due to a reduced blood flow to your hand, and may cause pain, coldness or tingling in the fingers or hand on your fistula or graft arm, tell the dialysis nurses if you experience these symptoms.

Blocked fistula or graft

This causes the thrill in the fistula or graft to stop, or become fainter. It can be caused by a narrowing or a blood clot. A blocked fistula or graft may require further surgery or another procedure to unblock it, so it is important to **tell the dialysis nurses immediately** if you think your fistula or graft is blocked.

Scab

If a scab over your needle site does not heal quickly, or gets larger, tell the dialysis nurses. A non-healing scab can put you at risk of bleeding and may need a review with the vascular access team.

Bleeding during dialysis

If blood oozes around your needle sites during dialysis, **tell the dialysis nurses immediately.**

Bleeding after dialysis

If you have prolonged bleeding (more than 15 minutes) from a needle site once you have had the needle removed, please tell the dialysis nurses.

Heavy bleeding

Please remember heavy bleeding from the fistula or graft is a very rare occurrence but it is important that you and your family know what to do if it happens as it is a medical emergency and could be life threatening.

Being aware of the possible complications above, and reporting them promptly should make sure that you do not experience heavy bleeding.

- Seek help immediately from anyone who is around. Heavy bleeding can make you feel faint, so please alert someone as quickly as you can.
- Dial 999 for an emergency ambulance and inform the emergency team that you have heavy bleeding from a dialysis fistula or graft.
- Apply a small clean dressing and firm pressure to the bleeding site (fistula or graft) with your fingers. Do not use a large dressing, for example, a towel, which may prevent you applying enough pressure in the right place.
- Lie down and lift the arm. If the bleeding isn't stopping, ask someone to help you by supporting your arm, in the air, over you. Make sure you are pressing in the right place.
- Stay calm. Bleeding can usually be stopped with enough pressure. It may take more pressure than usual.

If the bleeding stops before an ambulance arrives, you should still go to the Emergency Department (A&E) to get your fistula or graft checked. Please also contact us.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your AVF or AVG, please contact the access nurse specialist, **t:** 020 7188 7488 or 07827 281 534, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, or call the hospital switchboard, **t:** 020 7188 7188 and ask for the bleep desk. Ask for bleep 1414 and wait for a response. This will connect you to the access nurse specialist directly.

Out of hours, please contact
Astley Cooper Dialysis Unit, **t:** 020 7188 8824, Monday to Saturday, 7am to 9pm
Patience Ward, **t:** 020 7188 8838, overnight and on Sundays

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, and services offered at our hospitals, please visit **w:** 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, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

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

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints)

e: complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and accessible 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

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 website

Online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you take control of your health and wellbeing.

w: www.nhs.uk

Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, please get in touch.

t: 0800 731 0319 **e:** members@gstt.nhs.uk

w: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership



Leaflet number: 4664/VER1

Date published: November 2018

Review date: November 2021

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A list of sources is available on request