

Frequently Asked Questions About Urinary Catheters

What is a urinary catheter?

A urinary catheter is a thin tube placed in the bladder to drain urine. Urine drains through the tube into a bag that collects the urine. A urinary catheter may be used:

- If you are not able to urinate on your own
- To measure the amount of urine that you make, for example, during intensive care
- During and after some types of surgery
- During some tests of the kidneys and bladder

People with urinary catheters have a much higher chance of getting a urinary tract infection than people who don't have a catheter.

Catheter insertion and daily care

- Catheters are put in only when necessary and they are removed as soon as possible.
- Healthcare providers wash their hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub before and after touching your catheter.
- Only properly trained persons insert catheters using sterile ("clean") technique.
- The skin in the area where the catheter will be inserted is cleaned before inserting the catheter.
- Other methods to drain the urine are sometimes used, such as:
 - External catheters in men placed over the penis rather than into the penis.
 - Putting a temporary catheter in to drain the urine and removing it right away.
- Do not disconnect, tug, pull, twist or kink the catheter tubing.
- The catheter is secured to the leg to prevent pulling on the catheter.
- Keep the bag lower than the bladder to prevent urine from flowing back to the bladder.
- Empty the bag regularly. The drainage spout should not touch anything while emptying the bag.

What is “catheter-associated urinary tract infection”?

A urinary tract infection (also called “UTI”) is an infection in the urinary system, which includes the bladder and the kidneys. Germs like bacteria or yeasts do not normally live in these areas; but if germs are introduced, an infection can occur. If you have a urinary catheter, germs can travel along the catheter and cause an infection; in that case it is called a catheter-associated urinary tract infection (or “CA-UTI”). Most “CA-UTIs” can be treated with antibiotics and removal or change of the catheter. Your doctor will determine which antibiotic is best for you.

What can I do to help prevent catheter-associated urinary tract infections if I have a catheter?

- Always clean your hands before and after doing catheter care.
- Always keep your urine bag below the level of your bladder.
- Do not tug, pull, twist or kink the catheter tubing.
- Ask your healthcare provider each day if you still need the catheter.

What are the symptoms of a urinary tract infection?

Some of the common symptoms of a urinary tract infection are:

- Burning or pain in the lower abdomen (that is, below the stomach)
- Fever
- Bloody urine may be a sign of infection, but may be caused by other problems
- Burning during urination or an increase in the frequency of urination after the catheter is removed.
- Sometimes people with catheter-associated urinary tract infections do not have these symptoms of infection.

If you will be going home with a catheter, your doctor or nurse will talk to you about taking care of the catheter at home.

If you have questions, please ask your doctor or nurse.

This information is co-sponsored by:
The Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA)
Association for Professionals in Infection Control (APIC)
Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA)
Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
American Hospital Association (AHA)
The Joint Commission