

Overview

Urinary catheter

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A urinary catheter is a flexible tube used to empty your bladder and collect pee in a drainage bag.

Urinary catheters are usually inserted by a doctor or nurse.

They can be inserted through:

- the tube that carries pee out of the bladder (urethral catheter)
- a small opening made in your lower tummy (suprapubic catheter)

The catheter usually remains in your bladder for a period of time. The catheter allows pee to flow through it and into a drainage bag.

When urinary catheters are used

A urinary catheter is usually used if you have problems peeing naturally. It can also be used to empty your bladder before or after surgery and to help perform certain tests.

Reasons a urinary catheter may be used include:

- to allow pee to drain if you have an obstruction in the tube that carries pee out of the bladder (urethra). For example, because of scarring or prostate enlargement
- to allow you to pee if you have bladder weakness or nerve damage that affects your ability to pee
- to drain your bladder during childbirth if you have an [epidural anaesthetic](#)
- to drain your bladder before, during or after some types of surgery
- to deliver medication directly into the bladder. For example, during chemotherapy for bladder cancer
- treatment for urinary incontinence when other types of treatment have not worked

The catheter may be removed after a few minutes, hours or days. It may be needed for the long-term.

This will depend on the type of catheter you have and why it's being used.

Types of urinary catheter

There are 2 main types of urinary catheter: intermittent and indwelling.

Intermittent catheters

These are temporarily inserted into the bladder. They are removed when the bladder is empty.

Indwelling catheters

These remain in place for many days or weeks. They are held in position by an inflated balloon in the bladder.

They are more convenient and avoid the repeated insertions needed with intermittent catheters. But they are more likely to cause problems such as infections.

Inserting either type of catheter can be uncomfortable. An anaesthetic gel is used to reduce any pain. You may experience some discomfort while the catheter is in place. But most people with a long-term catheter get used to this.

Read more about the [types of urinary catheter](#)

Looking after your catheter

You may need a long-term urinary catheter.

If you do, you'll get advice before you leave hospital about:

- looking after it
- getting new catheter supplies
- reducing the risk of complications such as infections
- spotting signs of potential problems
- when you should seek further medical advice

You should be able to live a normal life with a urinary catheter. You should be able to carry out normal activities. For example, working, exercising, swimming and having sex.

You can put the catheter and bag under clothes.

Read more about [living with a urinary catheter](#)

Risks and potential problems

The main problems caused by urinary catheters are infections in the:

- urethra
- bladder
- kidneys – these are less common

These types of infection are [urinary tract infections \(UTIs\)](#). They usually need to be treated with [antibiotics](#).

You can get a UTI from either short or long-term catheter use. But the longer a catheter is used, the greater your risk of infection. Catheters should be inserted correctly and maintained properly. They should only be used for as long as necessary.

Catheters can sometimes lead to other problems. For example, bladder spasms, leakages, blockages, and damage to the urethra.

Read more about the [risks of urinary catheterisation](#)

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