



Home hemodialysis



When kidneys can no longer work properly on their own, dialysis is needed to filter waste and extra water from the blood. There are a few types of dialysis and different locations where treatment can occur. Dialysis that is done at home is called home *hemodialysis*.

We'll help you understand home dialysis and what happens during and after a treatment session, so you can choose the approach that best suits your lifestyle and goals.

What is home hemodialysis?

Home hemodialysis allows people with chronic kidney disease (CKD) to do dialysis treatments at home instead of a dialysis center. Home hemodialysis is done more often than in-center dialysis, so it cleans your blood more frequently. You'll feel better as a result. Home hemodialysis also has better life expectancy than in-center dialysis. Many people also can eliminate some medications when they do more frequent dialysis. Some people even sleep better and have more energy to do everyday activities.¹

How hemodialysis works

Hemodialysis (HD) uses a machine to clean your blood. The machine has a special filter called a *dialyzer*. During dialysis, the blood flows out of your body, through the dialyzer, and is then returned. The filter is very fine. Blood cells and proteins that the body needs are too big to go through the filter, so they are returned to the body. But wastes and extra water are small enough to pass through the filter, so they are removed from the body.

¹The National Kidney Foundation. Hemodialysis: What You Need to Know. 2013. Available at: [Kidney.org/sites/default/files/11-50-0214_hemodialysis.pdf](https://www.kidney.org/sites/default/files/11-50-0214_hemodialysis.pdf). Accessed December 3, 2020.



Before hemodialysis

It takes planning to start hemodialysis, so it's smart to start thinking about it before you need it. Your doctor may refer you to a surgeon at least six months before you start hemodialysis.

In order to do hemodialysis, there has to be a way for your blood to move between your body and the dialyzer. You'll need what is called a *vascular access*. This creates a connection between your blood vessels and the tubes leading to the dialyzer. It's usually placed in the arm with minor surgery. Rarely, it is placed in the leg.

Types of vascular access

There are three different types of vascular access, and your surgeon can help you choose the best one for you. They are:

- **Fistula**

This is usually the preferred choice, because it lasts the longest and has fewer problems, such as infections or blood clots.² The surgeon makes a fistula by joining an artery to a vein under your skin to make a bigger blood vessel. It takes one to four months to heal before it can be used.

- **Graft**

Grafts tend to have more problems than fistulas,² but your surgeon may perform a graft if a fistula isn't right for you. A graft is made by using a piece of soft tube to join an artery and vein in your arm. It usually needs to be in place for two weeks before you can use it.

- **Catheter**

A catheter is usually saved for temporary use, such as if you need to start dialysis before your fistula is ready. It tends to have more problems and infections than fistulas or grafts,² but it can be used long-term if you can't have a fistula or a graft. It's made by inserting a soft tube into a large vein in the neck or chest.

²Life Options and Medical Education Institute, Inc. Vascular Access for Hemodialysis. October 21, 2020. Available at: [Lifeoptions.org/living-with-kidney-failure/vascular-access/](https://lifeoptions.org/living-with-kidney-failure/vascular-access/). Accessed December 3, 2020.



Home hemodialysis schedules

Home hemodialysis provides the comfort of being in your own place and a flexible schedule. Rather than a dialysis center making your appointments, you choose when you want to have your sessions.

There are a few different schedules for home dialysis:

Conventional dialysis

- Three times a week
- Each session lasts about three to five hours

This schedule is similar to the one used in a dialysis center. Dialysis treatment itself doesn't hurt, but if your blood pressure gets too low, you may have some muscle cramping and feel nauseous.

Short daily dialysis

- Five to seven times a week
- Each session lasts two to four hours while you're awake

Some people like this schedule because doing dialysis more often means that less fluid needs to be removed each time. This can cut down on headaches, nausea, muscle cramping and feeling tired after a treatment.

Nightly dialysis

- Three to six nights a week
- Each session lasts eight hours, while you're sleep

These dialysis treatments are done overnight while you are asleep. Depending on what your doctor prescribes, you may do this every night or every other night. More hours of dialysis each week can mean that more waste is removed from the blood, so many people find that this schedule boosts their overall energy level.¹

¹The National Kidney Foundation. Hemodialysis: What You Need To Know. 2013. Available at: [Kidney.org/sites/default/files/11-50-0214_hemodialysis.pdf](https://www.kidney.org/sites/default/files/11-50-0214_hemodialysis.pdf). Accessed December 3, 2020.



Home hemodialysis

Home hemodialysis is a good fit for many people with CKD, but there are certain requirements. For example:

- You must have a clean space in your house for your home dialysis machine, equipment and supplies (you need about 15 square feet in total).
- You must have a reliable dialysis partner (such as a spouse, partner or close friend) who can help you with each of your treatments.
- You and your partner will need to complete a program that helps you learn about the dialysis machine, supplies, how to do home dialysis treatments and how to record the treatments in a log. The program is held in a dialysis center with a dialysis nurse. Most people learn how to do home dialysis correctly and comfortably in a number of weeks.³

Although it takes some getting used to, many people find that doing dialysis at home gives them the flexibility and energy level to live their best lives.¹ You can use the pros and cons list on the next page as you think about it. Talk to your doctor about whether or not home hemodialysis is the right choice for you.

¹The National Kidney Foundation. Hemodialysis: What You Need to Know. 2013. Available at: [Kidney.org/sites/default/files/11-50-0214_hemodialysis.pdf](https://www.kidney.org/sites/default/files/11-50-0214_hemodialysis.pdf). Accessed December 3, 2020.

³The National Kidney Foundation. Home Hemodialysis. April 16, 2020. Available at: [Kidney.org/atoz/content/homehemo](https://www.kidney.org/atoz/content/homehemo). Accessed December 28, 2020.



Things to consider with home hemodialysis

Pros

- You do your treatments in the comfort of your own home.
- There's no need to travel to and from a dialysis center.
- You set the schedule and choose when to do dialysis.
- You're in charge of your own day-to-day care and have a greater control.
- There may be fewer rules around eating and drinking, as compared to in-center dialysis.
- You may have more energy, enjoy a better quality of life and, potentially, live longer.¹

Cons

- You need a clean, dedicated space in your home for the machine and supplies and access to running water (if needed).
- You must have a dialysis care partner who can stay with you during each treatment.
- Both you and your partner must invest time in training.
- You don't have the in-person support of other people who are also doing dialysis treatments.



It's up to you to decide your treatment. Do what's best for you and your lifestyle, and work with your health care team to choose the treatment that's right for you.

¹The National Kidney Foundation. Hemodialysis: What You Need to Know. 2013. Available at: [Kidney.org/sites/default/files/11-50-0214_hemodialysis.pdf](https://www.kidney.org/sites/default/files/11-50-0214_hemodialysis.pdf). Accessed December 3, 2020.

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