



Hemodialysis at a dialysis center (in-center dialysis)



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 a dialysis center is called *in-center dialysis*.

We'll help you understand in-center dialysis and what happens during and after a treatment session there so you can choose if this is the approach that best suits your lifestyle and goals.

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 to your body. 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.

Because you have dialysis three days a week, wastes and fluid build up in between treatments and are then removed during your treatment. This timing of dialysis may make you feel tired and nauseated after your treatment and for part or all of the rest of your day.



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 dialysis.

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.¹ 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,¹ 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,¹ 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.

¹Life 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.



What happens at an in-center dialysis session?

In-center hemodialysis usually takes place three times a week. The dialysis center schedules your appointments. You'll need to get yourself to and from the dialysis center. If you need transportation, this may add hours to your day in getting to and from your treatment.

Each session lasts between three and five hours. Some dialysis centers offer a nighttime option, where you can sleep overnight in the dialysis center three times a week.

Each time you go to the dialysis center, you'll be weighed. A dialysis nurse will check your pulse, temperature and blood pressure. You'll sit in a chair and connect to the dialysis machine. The technician will clean the area where your vascular access is placed and insert the needles to begin the treatment.

During the treatment, the dialysis nurse will check your blood pressure. The treatment itself doesn't hurt, but if your blood pressure gets too low, you may have some muscle cramping and feel nauseated.

While you're there, you can read, look at your laptop or tablet, watch TV, talk to other people having dialysis, or sleep. It's important that you complete the treatment, which means staying on dialysis for the entire amount of time your doctor prescribed.

After a dialysis session

When the treatment is finished, you'll be disconnected from the machine. The nurse will take your pulse, temperature and blood pressure one last time. You may feel lightheaded afterward, so be careful when you stand up immediately after your treatment.

If you're feeling OK, you can drive yourself home. Some doctors recommend that you have someone drive you home during your first week of dialysis, until you get used to how it feels.

Some people who have in-center dialysis feel tired, and many go to bed when they get home.

See the pros and cons on the next page to help you decide. Talk to your doctor about whether in-center hemodialysis is the right choice for you.



Things to consider with in-center hemodialysis

Pros

- Trained staff are in charge of each of your treatments.
- You have the support of other people who are also having dialysis.
- You don't have to do dialysis every day.

Cons

- The dialysis center schedules your appointments. This may interfere with your work, school or personal schedule.
- You'll need to travel to and from the center at least three times a week.
- You won't have privacy, because other people will be having dialysis at the same time.
- You'll probably have more restrictions on what you eat and drink, compared to in-home dialysis.²
- Your energy level may dip in between treatments. This may be more noticeable on weekends when you go for a few days without dialysis.



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.

²David S. Food Choices for Home Hemodialysis. AAKP. August 28, 2016. Available at: [AAKP.org/food-choices-for-home-hemodialysis/](https://www.aakp.org/food-choices-for-home-hemodialysis/). Accessed December 3, 2020.

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