

In-center care when home isn't for you: hemodialysis at a dialysis center

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When kidneys can no longer work properly on their own, dialysis is needed to filter waste and extra water from your 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.

How does hemodialysis work?

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 your body. But wastes and extra water are small enough to pass through the filter, so they are removed from your body.

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

Before hemodialysis

You should start planning for dialysis as early as you can. Your doctor may refer you to a surgeon at least six months before you start dialysis.

To do HD, 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 your arm with minor surgery, but it may also rarely be placed in your 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 if a fistula isn't right for you, your surgeon may perform a graft. 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 a long-term option 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.





What happens at an in-center dialysis session?

In-center HD 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.

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In-center care when home isn't for you

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 okay, 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. Talk to your care team if you need help with transportation.

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

Talk to your doctor about whether in-center HD is the right choice for you. See the pros and cons below to help you decide.

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 won't have much flexibility because the dialysis center has a limit on how many people they can see at a time.
- 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 always your choice which treatment you decide. Do what's best for you and your lifestyle, and work with your doctor and care team to choose a treatment that's right for you.

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 September 2, 2021.

²David S. Food Choices for Home Hemodialysis. AAKP. August 28, 2016. Available at: [AAKP.org/food-choices-for-home-hemodialysis/](https://aakp.org/food-choices-for-home-hemodialysis/). Accessed September 2, 2021.

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