

Patient information factsheet

Having a peripherally inserted central catheter (PICC) insertion

We have written this factsheet as a guide to having a peripherally inserted central catheter (PICC) insertion. We hope it will help to answer some of the questions you may have. If there is anything you do not understand, a member of your healthcare team will be happy to explain further.

What is a peripherally inserted central catheter (PICC)?

A PICC (also called a PICC line) is a long, thin, flexible tube that is inserted into a large vein in the upper arm. It is used to safely administer medication into the bloodstream, similar to a cannula (a small tube that is inserted into a vein, usually in the back of your hand or arm).

PICC lines can be left in for several months, so will usually last for the full duration of your treatment. Depending on your treatment plan, a PICC can be divided into one or two lines to allow you to receive different treatments at the same time.

Why do I need a PICC line?

Your reason for having a PICC line will depend on your medical condition and your treatment plan.

A PICC line can be used to give treatments, such as:

- antibiotics
- chemotherapy
- blood transfusions
- intravenous (IV) nutrition
- IV treatment at home

It can also be used to take samples of your blood for testing.

What are the benefits of a PICC line?

A PICC line can make treatment and blood testing more comfortable by:

- reducing the irritation that certain drugs can cause
- preserving the health of your vessels
- preventing the need for multiple needle punctures

PICC lines are particularly helpful for people who:

- are anxious about needles
- have veins that are small or very difficult to find

How should I prepare for the procedure?

You can eat and drink as normal before the procedure.

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Before the procedure, we will explain the risks and benefits of having a PICC insertion, and give you a chance to ask any questions. We will then ask you to sign a consent form.

Where will the procedure take place?

We will perform the procedure in hospital in our radiology department, in a procedure room, in a high-care ward or in a dedicated side room.

What will happen during the procedure?

The insertion of a PICC line is a minimally invasive, sterile procedure that takes approximately 30 minutes.

You will need to lie flat on your back for the procedure. We will use an ultrasound machine to find a suitable large vein in your upper arm. We will then clean your arm and cover it with a sterile drape. We will then numb a small area of your arm with a local anaesthetic injection (this may sting briefly before it takes effect).

When the small area of your arm is completely numb, we will insert the PICC line through a fine needle into the large vein in your upper arm. You should not experience any pain during this part of the procedure. We will then guide the PICC line further into your vein until the tip (where the medication enters the bloodstream) sits within the large vein just above your heart. Once the PICC line is in the correct place, we will remove the needle. We can usually confirm that the PICC line is in the correct position during the procedure using ECG technology. However, sometimes we may have to perform a chest x-ray to check that the end of the line is in the right place.

A small section of the PICC line will remain outside of your body. We will attach this section to your upper arm using a clip (called a Statlock) and clear, adhesive dressing to hold it in place.

What will happen after the procedure?

Once the PICC line has been fixed in place, we can begin to administer medication.

Are there any risks or complications?

Insertion

It can sometimes be difficult to find a suitable vein or to get the PICC line into the correct position. If this is the case, we may have to insert the PICC line into a different vein or discuss alternative options with you.

Infection

It is possible for an infection to develop inside or around the place where the PICC line goes into the vein (this is called the insertion site). Contact your healthcare team immediately if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- pain, redness or swelling at the insertion site
- discoloured fluid coming from the insertion site
- a fever or chills

Blood clots (thrombus)

It is possible for a blood clot to develop around the PICC line. If this occurs, we will give you medication to dissolve the clot and we may need to remove the PICC line. Contact your healthcare team immediately if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- pain, swelling, discomfort or redness on the side of the insertion site

Vein inflammation (phlebitis)

Occasionally, the PICC line may irritate the vein wall, which can cause pain and redness along the length of the vein. If this occurs, use a warm compress to encourage good blood flow around the PICC line. If you have any concerns, please contact your healthcare team.

Bruising or bleeding

It is common to experience some bruising or bleeding at the insertion site. Please inform us of any blood thinners you are taking before we insert the PICC line, as this can increase your risk of bleeding.

A break or split in the PICC line

It is important that the PICC line is not broken or cut. Do not use scissors near your PICC line.

It is rare for a line to break or split, but if it does happen, contact your healthcare team immediately. The PICC line may need to be removed or replaced.

A dislodged PICC line

Review your PICC line once a day to measure how much of the line is out of your skin. The original length of the line can be found in your information pack. If the external part of the line changes length, please contact your healthcare team.

Damage to surrounding tissues or vessels (nerves and arteries)

We will minimise these risks by:

- cleaning the skin around the insertion site with antiseptic solution
- using sterile drapes and equipment
- using ultrasound guidance to locate the vein (this allows us to avoid nerves and arteries)
- discussing activities to avoid (to prevent clot formation)
- inserting the PICC line away from the joints (to reduce the movement of the line in the arm)

If you are not sure who to contact out of hours, please check with your healthcare team.

How can I look after my PICC line?

It is very important to take care of your PICC line to help prevent problems occurring.

You should change your dressing within the first 24 hours of the PICC line being inserted to remove the gauze and then weekly thereafter (or sooner if the dressing starts to peel off, gets wet or gets dirty).

A PICC line should not stop you carrying out day-to-day activities. However, please speak to your vascular access specialist before starting activities that are manual or involve repetitive motions, such as lifting weights, playing golf, fly fishing, painting or knitting.

Do:

- keep the insertion site dry and use a waterproof cover or 'cling film' when washing
- always wash your hands before handling your PICC line

Don't:

- submerge the PICC line under water
- swim
- undertake repetitive movements (particularly movements involving raising your arm above your head)

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Who should I contact if I have any concerns?

Contact your healthcare team immediately if you think something is wrong, or if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- pain, redness, oozing or swelling around the insertion site (these can be signs of an infection, blood clot or inflammation)
- bleeding from the insertion site (if this happens, apply pressure, raise the arm and wrap with a firmly wound bandage. The bleeding should stop but you will need to have a new dressing)
- an increase in the length of the tube that is on the outside of the arm (do not remove the PICC line)
- a high temperature (above 37.5°C), fever or chills (these can be signs of an infection)
- pain or difficulty when flushing the PICC line or leaking from the PICC line (if this happens, stop using the PICC line and contact your healthcare team for a review)

When will my PICC line be removed?

When your treatment has finished, the PICC line can be removed. This is a simple, quick and painless procedure and is usually performed by a nurse. They will remove the dressings, gently pull out the line, clean the removal site and cover it with a clean dressing.

Contact us

We hope this factsheet has helped to answer some of your questions. If you have any further questions or concerns about your PICC line or its care, please ask the nurses or doctors looking after you.

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