

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Apr 20, 2020

Catheterisation (female): having a catheter fitted#

Sometimes it's necessary to have a catheter fitted to help you to pass urine - often because you are having surgery. This leaflet tells you how and why it's done, how it helps, and if there are any possible problems.

You can use our information to talk with your doctor about your treatment.

What is a urethral catheter?

A urethral catheter is a thin rubber tube that's placed into your urethra to help you urinate. Your **urethra** is the tube that carries urine from your bladder out of your body when you go to the toilet.

The catheter goes all the way along the urethra and into the bladder and allows urine to pass easily out of the body.

Why might I need a urethral catheter?

There are several reasons why you might need to have a urethral catheter fitted. They include:

- having surgery in the area of your abdomen (tummy). You always need to have an empty bladder if you are having any kind of surgery around your abdomen. A full bladder can get in the way of your operation, and can easily be damaged if the surgeon is operating on nearby tissue
- if you suddenly find it hard to urinate, even though your bladder is full. This is called **acute urinary retention**. This can have several causes, including damage to nerves or to the bladder itself
- when your doctor needs to measure accurately how much urine your body is making. This is usually because you are ill. Healthy urine production is one way of checking that your body's systems are working properly
- bladder irrigation. This is when the bladder is rinsed out, to clear away material such as blood clots

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- bladder instillation. Medications are pumped gently into the bladder through the catheter to help treat the symptoms of cystitis, such as pain and burning
- a bladder obstruction. Several medical conditions can cause a bladder obstruction. But this tends to be more common in men.

What will happen?

To have the catheter fitted, you need to be undressed and lying on your back. Your doctor will ask you to raise your knees and open your legs, but with your feet together.

Before fitting the catheter your doctor will give you a local anaesthetic so that you don't feel any pain. This is done by pumping anaesthetic gel into the urethra. It's done with a syringe, but there's no needle and no puncture of the skin. The doctor will wait for a minute or so, for the anaesthetic to start working. He or she will then:

- insert the tip of the catheter into your urethra
- guide the catheter into the urethra with steady, gentle pressure
- wait until urine appears at the end of the catheter. When this happens, the doctor knows that the catheter is in the bladder. He or she will guide it a little farther in, so that it's as secure as possible
- pump a small amount of sterile water into the catheter. This inflates a small balloon at the end of the catheter that's in your bladder, which stops it from falling out
- attach a bag to the end of the catheter to collect the urine that you pass.

Some people need to have a catheter fitted to help with long-term medical conditions. But in most cases the catheter will be removed as soon as you no longer need it, to reduce the chance of an infection.

If you need to have your catheter in place for more than a short time, and you are able to walk, the collection bag can be simply attached to your leg, so that you can walk around.

What are the risks?

Having a catheter fitted shouldn't hurt, because of the local anaesthetic. But it can feel a little uncomfortable. There are several other possible complications that your doctor should discuss with you before the procedure, including:

- urinary tract infection (UTI). All the equipment your doctor uses will be sterile. But infections do still happen sometimes. If you get a UTI you might need antibiotics to treat it
- bleeding. A small amount of bleeding is common after having a catheter fitted. It usually stops by itself. But sometimes the bleeding can be heavier and take longer to stop
- a blocked catheter. Material from inside the bladder or urethra, such as a blood clot, can sometimes block the catheter. If this happens, you might need to have a new catheter fitted. But it's sometimes possible to flush water through the catheter and dislodge the blockage.

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