All About Your Peripherally Inserted Central Catheter (PICC)
General Information

Intravenous (IV) therapy is the delivery of fluid directly into a vein. An intravenous catheter is a hollow tube that is placed in a vein to deliver the fluid. Veins in the hand and arm can become tender and sore from long term intravenous therapy.

A catheter has been made that is easy to insert, comfortable for you and can remain in place until treatment is complete. This catheter is called a Peripherally Inserted Central Catheter or a “PICC”.

The following information is a guide for you to follow. Your doctor or nurse may change some of the information to meet your individual needs.

What is a PICC?

A PICC is a soft flexible tube or catheter that is inserted into an arm vein slightly above the elbow. The catheter is threaded up the arm until the tip is in a large vein near your heart. The PICC is made for long term use and can be left in place for as long as you need it.

What to expect when a PICC is inserted:

A PICC can be inserted in your room or in the X-Ray Department. Freezing is put in your skin to keep you comfortable and special care is taken to prevent infection. A chest x-ray is taken after the PICC is inserted to check where the tip is located.

Before the PICC is inserted let the nurse know if you would like some medication to relax you.

What to expect in the first few days:

The first dressing change will be 24 to 72 hours after insertion. Then the dressing will be changed once a week or when it is loose, wet or unclean.

Occasionally a vein may become sore the first few days after a PICC is inserted. It is important to place a warm wet towel in a plastic bag over the sore area for 20 minutes 3 to 4 times a day. To make sure you do not burn yourself use warm tap water to heat the towel, do not use the microwave. A warm bean bag may be used. Speak with your nurse or doctor about taking an anti-inflammatory medication.
Taking care of your PICC at home:

• Community Health Nurses will see you at a community clinic or at your home. They will assist you to care for your PICC.
• Weekly dressing changes are needed (sometimes more frequently).
• Community Health Nurses will teach you how to give your IV medication.
• Look at your site once a day. The PICC dressing should be dry and intact. The PICC site should be free from tenderness, redness, drainage or swelling.
• Contact your Community Health Nurse if a problem is detected.

Are there restrictions to my daily living?

• Avoid carrying bags or purses over your “PICC” shoulder.
• When you shower or bathe wrap the PICC arm with plastic wrap and tape closed. This stops water leaking under the dressing.
• Avoid strenuous activity or activities that have constant arm movement, such as: moving heavy objects over 10 pounds or 4.5 kilograms; jumping jacks; weight lifting; or vacuuming. Performing these activities may cause the PICC to block or the tip of the PICC to no longer be in the correct position.
• Moderate exercise such as walking, does not harm your PICC.
• Avoid swimming or getting into a hot tub. It is difficult to stop water from getting under the PICC dressing and causing an infection.
• Take care to give your medications on time.
• Follow instructions carefully, they are designed to prevent problems.

Be able to detect problems and know what to do:

Do not expect problems, but be ready if they happen. The following is a list of potential problems with specific information about each one.
How will I know if I have an infection?

What you will see or feel:
You may have:
• fever or chills
• temperature above 38°C or 101°F
• flu-like feeling, lack of energy
• redness, swelling, pain, or drainage (pus) at the PICC site
• PICC site feels warm to touch

What to do:
• Call your nurse immediately.
• If you are unable to reach your Community Health Nurse go to the nearest Hospital Emergency.

How to avoid it:
• Wash hands before doing any PICC care.
• Keep fingers away from sterile points and connections.
• Keep your PICC dressing dry.
• Call your nurse if your PICC dressing is wet, loose or you see drainage.
• Look at your site once a day. The PICC dressing should be dry and intact. The PICC site should be free from redness, drainage or swelling.
• Keep supplies clean and dry.
• When cleaning with alcohol make sure it dries completely.
• Everyone who uses your PICC should follow the steps described above. If they do not, tell them you are concerned about infection. The PICC is yours to look after!

How will I know if my vein is irritated?

What you will see or feel:
• Redness, swelling, pain or warmth at the PICC site or along your arm.

What to do:
• Call your nurse.
• Place a warm wet towel in a plastic bag or warm bean bag over the sore area for 20 minutes 3 to 4 times a day. The towel and bean bag should feel comfortable on your skin. If they are too hot you may burn your arm.
• Elevate your PICC arm.
• Speak with your nurse or doctor about taking an anti-inflammatory medication.

How to avoid it:
• Use your arm normally. Do not keep it stiff.
• Do not carry bags or purses over your PICC shoulder.
How will I know if I have a small hole in the catheter?

What you will see or feel:
• Fluid under the dressing.
• Breakage or separation of the PICC end.
• Pain in the arm, especially when the medication is being delivered.

What to do:
• Stop the IV medication.
• If you were given a clamp. Clamp the PICC between the break and where the PICC goes into your body.”
• If you were not given a clamp. Fold the PICC back on itself between the break and where the PICC goes into your body. This will stop blood or air from going into the PICC.
• Place the broken PICC section that remains in you in a sterile gauze then wrap with tape. This will prevent infection.
• Call your Nurse. If your Nurse is not available go to the nearest Hospital Emergency.

How to avoid it:
• Do not pull on the PICC or IV tubing.
• Ensure PICC/IV tubing is taped to your skin.
• Use a 10 mL syringe or larger to flush the PICC.
• Do not use force to flush the PICC.
• Do not use scissors near the PICC.

What do I do if the cap comes off?

What you will see:
• No cap on the PICC.

What to do:
• Clean the open end of the PICC with an alcohol swab and attach a new cap.
• Call your Nurse.

How to avoid it:
• Hold onto the cap when you are attaching or removing IV tubing or syringes.
• Make sure the cap is firmly attached to the PICC when you complete your IV medication.
• Tape PICC/IV tubing to skin.
What do I do if the PICC breaks?

What you will see or feel:
• Fluid under the dressing.
• Breakage or separation of the PICC end.

What to do:
• If you were given a clamp. Clamp the PICC between the break and where the PICC goes into your body.
• If you were not given a clamp. Fold the PICC back on itself between the break and where the PICC goes into your body. This will stop air or blood from going into the PICC.
• Place the broken PICC section that remains in your arm in a sterile gauze then wrap with tape. This will prevent infection.
• Call your Nurse. If the Nurse is not available go to the nearest Hospital Emergency.
• Some PICCs can be repaired, others can not.

How to avoid it:
• Tape IV tubing to your skin.
• Do not pull or tug on PICC or IV tubing.
• Make sure your IV tubing will not become caught on anything when you move around.
• Do not use scissors near your PICC.

What do I do if the IV will not run?

What you will see or hear:
• IV medication will not run or is running slowly.
• If a pump is used to give your medication the pump may alarm.

What to do:
• Make sure the IV tubing clamp is opened.
• Look at your PICC dressing, the PICC line should be not be kinked.
• Call your nurse.
• If the Community Health Nurse is not available, stop the pump, take the battery out and call the Nurse first thing in the morning.

How to avoid it:
• Make sure the IV tubing clamp can not be accidentally clamped.
• PICC dressing is changed by nurses only.
• After the PICC dressing is changed make sure the PICC is not bent under the dressing.
• The PICC is flushed with normal saline as per your nurse’s instruction.
What can I do if the nurses are having difficulty taking blood samples?

What you will see:
• The solution can go in but blood can not be drawn from the PICC.

What to do:
• The nurse will ask you to cough or hold your breath for a few seconds, move your shoulder or change your position (lie down or sit up).
• If the nurse can not take blood from the PICC line a special medication will be put into the PICC. This is done in the hospital by a specially trained nurse.

How to avoid it:
• Only Registered Nurses can draw blood from your PICC.
• The PICC will be flushed with normal saline before and after each use or once a week if not in use.
• Nurses can use the PICC to draw blood but not lab technicians.

What do I do if there is air in the catheter?

What you will see or feel:
• More than six inches of air in IV tubing.
• Short of breath or chest pain.

What to do:
• Stop the IV fluid.
• Call your nurse.
• If you are short of breath or have chest pain call 911 right away and lie down on your left side.

How to avoid it:
• Check that the IV tubing is free of air when you set up the tubing.
• Make sure your PICC does not break.

How will I know if I have a clot in my vein?

What you will see or feel:
• Swelling of your PICC hand, arm or neck.
• Pain in your PICC arm.

What to do:
• Call your nurse.
• If your nurse is not available go to the nearest hospital.

How to avoid it:
• Tell your Nurse immediately if your PICC arm is sore.
• Good hydration is important.
What do I do if blood is seen in the PICC?

• If you have been taught by your Community Health Nurse how to flush your PICC do so. Flush until no blood is seen in the PICC.
• If you meet resistance when you flush, stop and contact your nurse.
• Call your nurse right away.

What do I do if I see fresh blood more than a teaspoon under my PICC dressing?

• Call your nurse.
• Your PICC dressing will need to be changed.

What do I do if I feel my heart beating differently when I lie on my side?

• Go to the nearest hospital emergency department, the catheter may need to be withdrawn slightly.