

# Peripherally Inserted Central Catheter (PICC)

## What is a PICC?

A PICC is a very fine flexible tube measuring 50-60cm in length. It is placed in a vein in the arm and threaded up into a large vein outside the heart. The PICC is made of silicone or polyurethane with a rounded tip. The PICC can have either 1 or 2 internal tubes called lumens and are defined as single or dual lumen PICC(s). The treatment prescribed determines which is used.

## Why do I need a PICC?

You will need a PICC for one of several reasons:

- The treatment that you require can only be given through a central line such as a PICC.
- The PICC can be used instead of regularly having to have needles placed in your arm which can be painful.
- You may need treatment at home and this can be managed using a PICC.

## Who will put in my PICC?

Your PICC will be put in by the Interventional Radiological Team in the Main X-ray Department at St Peter's Hospital. You can eat and drink normally before and after.

## How long will it take?

It usually takes about 20 minutes to actually put the line in, but you should allow 1 to 2 hours for the appointment. This will give time for the team to explain everything, get all the equipment together and check the line afterwards.

## How is my PICC put in?

Your skin will be numbed with local anaesthetic – a small amount of local anaesthetic will be injected underneath the surface of the skin. An ultrasound machine will be used to help identify the best vein for the PICC to go into. A needle is put into a vein and using fluoroscopic (x-ray) guidance your PICC line is placed in the correct position. This should be a painless procedure although some patients may experience some minor discomfort similar to having a blood test done.

## Dressing

After insertion, a dressing will be applied to the PICC exit site and a Tubigrip on the arm to cover the PICC.

## Problems with PICC insertions

Most PICC insertions go smoothly, but occasionally there are problems. Sometimes the shape of the vein can prevent the PICC from being threaded upwards. If this happens, the team will probably try again using a different vein.

If PICC placement is unsuccessful then it may be necessary for you to have another type of line – this is called a central tunnelled line. This would mean coming for a separate appointment on another day.

## Aftercare

Your PICC will need to be flushed with saline and dressed once a week. If you are in hospital, this will be done by the Ward Nurses. If you go home following the insertion of your PICC, this may be done by the District Nurse or at one of your outpatient appointments.

## Lifestyle

- You will be able to move your arm normally when the PICC is in place and carry on your life as before.
- You may bathe or shower, but be careful your dressing and line remain dry.
- Swimming is not recommended whilst the PICC is in place.
- Do not use scissors, razors, nail polish or liquid tape remover near the line.
- You can continue working if you are medically fit and your doctor is happy for you to do so. It is advisable to avoid heavy manual work or lifting.
- You can drive as long as you feel fit and able to.

## What are the risks?

Complications are infrequent, although can occur, so it is essential that you understand and recognise them:

- **Phlebitis** – Inflammation of the vein the PICC is placed in. Symptoms are redness or swelling above the site of insertion. It is caused by the body's response to a foreign material inside a vein and usually occurs during the first week. To reduce the risk of it occurring you are advised to apply heat, in the form of a heat pad or hot water bottle to the area just above where the PICC goes into the arm. You should do this 4 times a day for about 20 minutes for the first 2 to 3 days after the PICC has been inserted. You can also do this at any time if you suspect phlebitis, but contact your GP if this does not resolve the problem within 48 hours.
- **Infection** – Redness, discharge at the exit site, shivering and shaking, feeling unwell or high fever especially after flushing. If this happens contact your District Nurse, GP or ring the Interventional Nurses on 01932 722500. If all of that is unsuccessful then you must attend your local A&E for advice.
- **PICC blockage/leakage** – The PICC is unable to be flushed and there may be dampness or white powder under the dressing. If this happens whilst you have an infusion running, tell the nurses looking after the line what is happening. If you are in between treatments you should contact your District Nurse or the Interventional Nurses at the earliest opportunity. It may be possible to repair a blocked or split line.
- **Line displacement** – If you notice that the external part of the PICC line is longer, this may indicate that it has moved out of the vein. If this happens whilst you have an infusion running let the nurses know immediately. If you are in between treatments you should contact your District Nurse or the Interventional Nurses as soon as possible.
- **Thrombosis** – A small blood clot in the vein. This sounds alarming but is unlikely to cause a serious problem and may be treated by giving medication to dissolve the clot or by removing the PICC. Symptoms are pain, swelling or shoulder pain on the same side as the PICC or shortness of breath. If you experience any of these symptoms contact your District Nurse, GP or attend A&E immediately.



## Removal


Once your treatment is complete your line will be removed. This is a very simple process and takes only a few minutes. This is normally undertaken by the District Nurses or the Interventional Nurses.

*Sources used to help write this leaflet include:*

- *The Royal Marsden Hospital Manual of Clinical Nursing Procedures 6<sup>th</sup> Ed Dougherty & Lister*
- *Cancerbacup.org.uk*
- *Bard Ltd*

## Contact Details

St Peter's Hospital – 01932 872000  
Interventional Nurses – 01932 872500  
Interventional Suite – 01932 723470



## Further Information

We endeavour to provide an excellent service at all times, but should you have any concerns please, in the first instance, raise these with the Matron, Senior Nurse or Manager on duty. If they cannot resolve your concern, please contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01932 723553 or email [pals@asph.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@asph.nhs.uk). If you remain concerned, PALS can also advise upon how to make a formal complaint.

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**We can provide interpreters for a variety of languages, information in larger print or other formats (e.g. audio) - please call us on 01932 723553.**



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