

Cystic **Fibrosis** *our focus*

The use of ports in cystic fibrosis

Factsheet – March 2013

The use of ports (totally implantable venous access devices) in cystic fibrosis

Introduction

This factsheet is designed to give you some information about ports. It answers the questions most frequently asked by people with cystic fibrosis and gives you the opportunity to discuss ports with family, friends and carers.

The information is only meant as a general guide as care and treatment is designed to meet your individual healthcare needs. Your own specialist nurse, physician / paediatrician or surgeon will be able to further advise you personally about having a port inserted and the aftercare required.

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What is a port?

A port or portacath as it may be called is a totally implantable venous access device (sometimes called a TIVAD for short), which is placed under the skin and is a means of delivering medication to the body easily and effectively. A port comprises two main parts, as shown in the diagram above:

- a portal chamber, which can be made of special plastic or titanium (a strong lightweight metal) and has a silicone septum (injection area);
- a catheter, which is a fine hollow tube connected to the portal chamber.

Medication is given through the port by inserting a special needle through the skin into the portal chamber and injecting or infusing the drugs, which will travel along the catheter into the venous system (the veins).

Ports are either round or oval shaped and are available as an adult size, low profile (so they are less visible) or paediatric size. Some very small ports have been specially made to be placed in the arm.

You can discuss the size and type of port you require with your medical team.

Who are ports for?

Ports can be used for people with cystic fibrosis who require long-term, frequent intravenous antibiotic treatment or who have poor venous access ('difficult veins').

Ports are not usually considered for those with cystic fibrosis who have short-term treatment needs or who have infrequent courses of intravenous antibiotics. Again, your medical team will advise if a port is suitable for your treatment needs.

How are ports put in?

Having a port inserted requires a small operation. This is usually carried out under a general anaesthetic but can, if required, be performed using a local anaesthetic. Children will almost certainly be given a general anaesthetic.

A small incision is made for the catheter to be threaded through a large vein leading to the heart. The other end of the catheter is then tunnelled under the skin and connected to the portal chamber that has been inserted into a pocket under the skin. This may require a second small incision.

Operation times can vary according to the method of placement of the port and the patient concerned, but on average it takes about 45 minutes to an hour, plus some time spent recovering from the anaesthetic. An overnight stay is usual following the operation but for some patients the insertion of a port may be combined with a treatment episode requiring a longer period in hospital.

There may be some bruising or swelling over the area and slight discomfort following the operation but this generally disappears within the first week. The stitches are usually under the skin and will dissolve.

What will the port look like – will I have a scar?

The port is totally implanted under the skin. There are no tubes or surgical devices visible. If you are quite slim there may be a bump visible under the skin where the portal chamber has been inserted. Otherwise, depending on your build and the position of the port, it may not be visible at all.

There will be a small scar about one to two inches long where the portal chamber has been inserted and possibly another where the catheter has been threaded into the vein. Each individual heals differently but most people find the scars are minimal and fade well.

Ports can be placed in many different positions on the body but the most common siting is on the upper chest wall. Other positions could be the side of the chest wall or arm. You should be given the opportunity to discuss this fully with your team and surgeon placing the port.

How long will the port last?

If the port is well cared for it can last many years. The silicone covering the portal chamber can take about 2,000 punctures (needles) for the adult size and about 1,500 for the smaller paediatric size. This will vary slightly according to the needle size used.

Most patients will have a needle put in at the beginning of a treatment episode and all the drugs will be injected through a tube connected to the needle. If the course of treatment is longer than a week, the needle may need to be changed. It will also need flushing (see 'Who looks after the port?', below), when not in use, every four to six weeks. Therefore, if you work out how often you are likely to need to have your port accessed (flushes and IV courses), you will see it is intended for long-term use.

Occasionally ports stop working properly, perhaps because of a blockage or 'kinking' of the catheter, or because the catheter has sprung a 'leak'. This is unusual and is usually after the port has been in some considerable time. In these cases the port is removed and if still required, another one is inserted.

Does it hurt to use the port?

Local anaesthetic cream can be applied over the port area prior to the needle being placed and is extremely effective. When this is used you will not feel the needle but may sense a small painless push as it goes in. Some patients prefer local anaesthetic ('freezy') spray. After a while the sensation over the port may reduce and many patients choose not to bother with local anaesthetic preparations. Inserting the needle is very quick, as there is no need to look for a vein.

Does the port need any special care between treatment courses?

If the port has not been used for four to six weeks (this may vary depending on your centre/clinic), it is necessary to flush the system with a fresh heparin solution. This is to avoid blood clotting in the line, and is quick and easy to do. Instead of the needle remaining in for a course of treatment, a heparin solution is injected into the port and the needle removed.

Who looks after the port?

Accessing and flushing the port is carried out by specially trained nursing and medical staff. Patients and carers may be taught how to do this for a more independent lifestyle, however this would need to be discussed with your local team.

Does a port affect X-rays?

It is perfectly safe to have X-rays or scans when you have a plastic or titanium port. You will need to let the radiologist know that you have had a port inserted. The port will be visible on a chest X-ray.

Will the port limit any of my activities?

The port is a totally enclosed system and therefore you are able to shower, bathe and swim as normal. You will also be able to continue with most sporting activities. However you may be asked to avoid contact sports such as boxing, judo and rugby. Ports are made from durable materials but it is wise to refrain from sports that are likely to cause severe body blows.

When the port has been accessed for treatment there will be a dressing covering it and you should avoid getting it wet or any vigorous activity that may dislodge the needle.

Many children and adults continue with education or work during a course of treatment via the port. A member of your care team will be happy to liaise with schools or employers.

What if I no longer need the port?

The port can stay in the body providing it is flushed each month. Alternatively it can be removed surgically.

So what are the overall benefits of having a port?

- A port gives instant venous access.
- Intravenous drugs can be given painlessly, without the side effect of sore veins.
- Ports can be used for drips or bolus drugs (syringe push).
- The system is under the skin with no visible tubes outside the body as with central venous lines (CVL).
- As the port is under the skin, there is less risk of infection.
- No tubes or catheters are visible when the port is not in use.
- A port is less likely to be damaged than a CVL.
- You can bath, shower and swim when the port is not in use.
- It leaves hands and arms free for writing, general activities and driving.

Are there any disadvantages or special considerations to ports?

- A small operation and usually a general anaesthetic are required to insert a port.
- The port may be visible as a 'bump' under the skin.
- Ports are more suitable for patients with long-term treatment needs.
- Staff and patients or carers need to be specially trained to access ports.
- Special needles must be used to avoid damaging the port.
- When not in use the port must be flushed every four to six weeks with a heparin solution.
- Strict sterile technique is necessary when accessing the port to prevent infection.
- An operation is required to remove the port.

Summary

This factsheet has hopefully given you some clear information and has answered most of the questions regarding ports, their placement and the ongoing care they need. It aims to cover general information that can be discussed in further detail with your healthcare team. They will know you well and will be able to answer questions and give appropriate information particular to you. Together, you will then be able to make a decision regarding port placement that is right for you.

Further information

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust provides information about cystic fibrosis through our factsheets, leaflets and other publications.

Most of our publications can be downloaded from our website or ordered using our online publications order form.

Visit www.cysticfibrosis.org.uk/publications.

Alternatively, to order hard copies of our publications you can telephone the CF Trust on 020 8464 7211.

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We would welcome your feedback on this or any other of our publications. Please email publications@cysticfibrosis.org.uk.



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The information included in this publication is not intended to replace any advice you may receive from your doctor or CF multidisciplinary team and it is important that you seek medical advice whenever considering a change of treatment.

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