

Let's Talk About...

Spina bifida and self-catheterization

Children with spina bifida may have urine and bowel control problems because of spine injury before birth. To develop urinary control, many children need a small tube (catheter) inserted in their bladder through the urethra (opening where urine leaves the body). This is called catheterization.

Once your child is old enough and developmentally ready, they should learn self-catheterization (often called self-cath or cathing). At this time, your child learns to insert the catheter on their own. Cathing independence is an important step toward lifelong self-care and bladder control management.

When is a good time for my child to begin self-catheterization?

Your child's primary healthcare provider or spina bifida team can help you determine the best time for your child to learn self-catheterization. Many children begin at 5–7 years old, but you and your child can decide what's best.

How do I know if my child can do self-catheterization?

To evaluate whether your child is ready for self-catheterization:

- Assess your child's psychomotor abilities with their healthcare team.
 - Manual dexterity and strength: Can your child string beads, push a straw through a lid, hold a pencil, and draw or write?
 - Tactile skills: Is your child comfortable touching different textures?
 - Visual skills: Can your child show where to put the catheter and identify each end of it?
 - Cognitive skills: Can your child understand and follow instructions, remember and focus on a task, and put specific tasks in the correct order?



- Decide whether your child is emotionally ready to learn. Look for severe anxiety that could prevent them from learning.
- Think about any physical limitations, like poor grip or trouble with balance, transferring from sitting to standing, or dressing. The healthcare team can help you find solutions to these potential barriers.
- Consider whether parents and caregivers can teach your child and commit to helping them learn.

Your child may have trouble in a few of these areas, but the spina bifida team can help you work with your child on improving these skills. If your child isn't ready yet, the healthcare team can help you involve your child in the cathing process early and get them ready to learn at the right time.

What supplies does my child need for self-catheterization?

To help your child with self-catheterization, they may need:

- A toilet safety frame (so your child can balance with one hand while cathing)
- A reducer ring (to make the toilet opening smaller and offer soft support for the pelvis)
- A plastic training toilet (for a younger child)

You can buy a toilet safety frame and reducer ring online or from a wheelchair specialist (with a prescription from your child’s doctor).

Some insurance companies may cover the supplies you get with a prescription. Training toilets are inexpensive and available in many stores.

How do I teach my child self-catheterization?

The spina bifida team will tell you what to expect and how to prepare your child for self-catheterization once your child is ready. They’ll then help you begin a formal self-catheterization training program and provide age-appropriate handouts and teaching methods. The ultimate self-catheterization goal is having your child ready to learn and succeed in this next step of independence.

Notes

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