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A Parent/Carer's Guide to inserting a cannula (or 'drip') in children (page 1 of 2)

What is a cannula (or 'drip')?

A cannula is a small, plastic hollow tube that is placed into a vein to allow us to give fluids or medications easily. They come in different sizes and the doctor will choose one that is suitable for the size of your child. Inside the plastic tube there is a needle that is used to insert it into the vein. This needle is removed as soon as it is in the right place leaving just the plastic tube or cannula behind.

Who needs a cannula?

There are a number of different reasons why we may recommend your child has a cannula (or 'drip'). Children who are unwell may need us to give them medicines, including antibiotics, intravenously; that is directly into a vein. This may be because they are vomiting and are not able to keep medicines down, or so unwell that they may not absorb medicines taken by mouth. Some children may be dehydrated and need to be given fluids directly into a vein while others may need injections for special investigations. We can also take blood tests at the same time as putting in a cannula.

Will it hurt?

See our information leaflet 'A Parent's Guide to Blood Tests in Children' for ways you can help lessen any distress to your child when putting in a cannula. Sometimes when medicines are put into a cannula it might be uncomfortable but this should be mild and only last a short time. Most children can be distracted and reassured through the process. If your child experiences significant discomfort, it is likely that the cannula is no longer working and needs to be replaced (see over).

Where will it be placed?

The doctor who is treating your child will look to see where the best veins are for putting in a cannula. This will usually be either the back of a hand or around the elbow but we would sometimes need to look for other places such as feet (particularly in babies).

If your child is right or left handed, or sucks a thumb, let the doctor know before they insert the cannula so that they can try to avoid using that hand if at all possible.

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Won't my child pull it out?

The cannula is held in place with special adhesive dressings and a bandage. A plastic splint is often used to keep any joint still near where the cannula is placed (usually wrist or elbow) to help stop it falling out accidentally.

Most children don't mind having a cannula in too much. You can help to prevent the cannula coming out of the vein by distracting your child if they start playing with the bandage and by making sure the area is kept dry at all times.

Are there any complications?

- as children have small veins, it can sometimes be difficult to find a good vein straight away. It sometimes takes more than one attempt to put the cannula in
- a cannula may stop working after it has been put in. This may be because it has accidentally come out of the vein or has become blocked by clotted blood (which we try to prevent by a process referred to as 'flushing' – putting a small amount of sterile saline solution into the cannula to flush out any blood)
- sometimes the skin around the insertion site can become painful and inflamed.

If any of these happen we would need to remove the cannula.

Nursing staff will check the appearance of the skin around the cannula site every time they use it to make sure that there are no complications. Sometimes the cannula will need to be replaced. At other times your child may have become so much better that it is no longer needed.

How is it removed?

Removing the adhesive dressing is usually the most tricky part – a bit like taking off a big sticky plaster. The cannula itself comes out very easily. There may be a little bleeding once it has been removed which can be reduced by pressing on the area with a piece of cotton wool.

Further questions?

If you have any further questions regarding your child's care, please speak to the staff looking after them who will be glad to help.