

Preventing surgical site infections

What you should know before your surgery

What is a surgical site infection?

A surgical site infection is an infection that occurs after surgery in the part of the body where surgery took place. Most patients do not develop an infection, but some do. Any cut made on the skin gives germs easy access to cause an infection. An infection can start from two days to four weeks after surgery and may spread deeper if not treated.

Here are some ways you can prevent infections:

Before your surgery:

- Tell your care team about any problems you may be having and if you have had a surgical site infection or other serious infection in the past
- Find out what you can do to keep your blood sugar levels in control before, during, and after surgery. The stress of surgery can make those levels fluctuate and make you more prone to infection
- Maintain a healthy diet. Make sure your diet includes items that are rich in vitamins, minerals, and protein
- If you are overweight, try to lose some of those extra pounds before your surgery. Patients who are overweight are more likely to develop complications, including infection
- If you are a smoker and are considering quitting, now is a good time. Patients who smoke get more infections and smoking slows down the healing process. We have resources to help you quit
- Do not shave or wax the area where you will have surgery. This can irritate the skin and make it easier to develop an infection
- Shower with antimicrobial soap the night before and the morning of surgery. You may be given a special solution to use to clean your skin. Follow the instructions given to you

At the time of your surgery:

- Notify your care team of any skin infections, rashes, or sores
- Speak up if you do not see your care team members wash their hands before examining you
- If you are cold, ask for warm blankets. Staying warm immediately prior to, during, and up to four hours after surgery helps reduce the risk of infection

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What you should know after your surgery

While you are in the hospital:

- Speak up if you do not see your care team members wash their hands before examining you
- Ask your care team when you can get up and moving. Usually, the sooner you are able to get up and move around, the quicker the healing process can begin
- Keep a bottle of waterless hand gel by your bed and use frequently (this will be given to you when you complete surgery and return to your room). In the hospital, hands are the most common way germs are transmitted. When your hands are visibly dirty, wash with soap and water
- Remind all visitors to wash their hands
- If you notice that a dressing has become loose or is wet, ask a nurse to change it for you. Bandages should stay clean and dry to help protect your skin. Also tell your nurse if a drainage tube or catheter becomes loose
- If you do need a urinary catheter following surgery, remind your care team that you want it removed as soon as possible since it will reduce your risk of infection. It is also important for you to drink as many fluids as allowed to help flush your urinary tract system
- If your doctor prescribes breathing exercises following surgery, make sure you follow the instructions for how often to perform the exercises. This will help keep your lungs clear. You also should be as active as your doctor will allow. Even if it's just a slow walk across the room, you are helping your body to heal
- Before leaving the hospital, make sure you understand all of your care team's instructions, including medication, bathing/showering, wound care, what level of activity you can do, and when to follow up with your provider

When you are at home:

- Wash your hands before and after touching your wound and/or dressing
- Follow your provider's instructions on dressing changes, but in general:
 - Keep your wound clean and dry for the first 24 hours. In most cases, you can take a shower after 48 hours, but ask your provider for specific instructions
 - Follow your provider's instructions on dressing changes, wound cleaning, and when to have sutures removed if applicable
 - Use only a clean towel for gentle washing of the wound. Pat dry with a clean towel or gauze
- Change your dressing in a clean room. Store your dressing supplies in a clean bag. Throw away the dirty dressing right away and remember to wash your hands
- If your provider prescribed antibiotics, make sure you take them all. Do not skip any medication
- Get plenty of sleep/rest. Avoid doing tiring activities
- Wear loose clothing
- Follow a healthy diet
- Watch for signs of infection - Call your provider immediately or go to the nearest ER if you are experiencing any of the following:
 - Fever of greater than 100.4 °, chills, swelling, redness, or warmth around the wound, excessive pain at the incision site, drainage of cloudy, bloody, or greenish fluid from the incision, foul smell coming from the incision, or separation or opening of the incision