

PATIENT EDUCATION: SURGICAL SITE INFECTIONS

What is a Surgical Site Infection (SSI)?

A surgical site infection is an infection that occurs after surgery in the part of the body where the surgery took place. Most patients who have surgery do not develop an infection. Some of the common symptoms of a surgical site infection are:

- Redness and pain around the area where you had surgery
- Drainage of cloudy fluid from your surgical wound
- Fever

Can SSIs be treated?

Yes. Most surgical site infections can be treated with antibiotics. The antibiotic given to you depends on the bacteria (germs) causing the infection. Sometimes patients with SSIs also need another surgery to treat the infection.

What are some of the things that hospitals are doing to prevent SSIs?

To prevent SSIs, doctors, nurses, and other healthcare providers:

- Clean their hands and arms up to their elbows with an antiseptic agent just before the surgery.
- Clean their hands with an alcohol-based hand rub or with soap and water before and after caring for each patient.
- May remove some of your hair immediately before your surgery using electric clippers if the hair is in the same area where the procedure will occur. They should not shave you with a razor.
- Wear special hair covers, masks, gowns, and gloves during surgery to keep the surgery area clean.
- May give you antibiotics before your surgery starts. In most cases, you should get antibiotics within 60 minutes before the surgery starts and the antibiotics should be stopped within 24 hours after surgery.
- May give you a gown that attaches to a warm air blower. Keeping you warm prior to and during surgery helps prevent SSIs.
- Clean the skin at the site of your surgery with a special soap that kills germs.

PATIENT EDUCATION: SURGICAL SITE INFECTIONS, p. 2

What can I do to help prevent SSIs?

Before your surgery:

- Tell your doctor about other medical problems you may have. If you had an SSI after a previous surgery or any other serious infection, please tell your doctor.
- Health problems such as allergies, diabetes, cold/flu symptoms, and obesity could affect your surgery and your treatment. If you have diabetes, monitor and make every effort to control your blood sugar.
- Quit smoking. Patients who smoke get more infections. Talk to your doctor about how you can quit before your surgery.
- Do not shave near where you will have surgery. Shaving with a razor can irritate your skin and make it easier to develop an infection.
- Shower and wash your hair the morning of surgery. Put on clean clothes after showering.
- Do not apply lotions, powders, hair spray or makeup.
- Notify the doctor's office if you have a skin infection, rash, or sores prior to surgery.

At the time of your surgery:

- Speak up if someone tries to shave you with a razor before surgery. Ask why you need to be shaved and talk with your surgeon if you have any concerns.
- Ask if you will get antibiotics before surgery.

After your surgery:

- Make sure that your healthcare providers clean their hands before examining you, either with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub. If you do not see your providers clean their hands, please ask them to do so.
- Family and friends who visit you should not touch the surgical wound or dressings.
- Family and friends should clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub before and after visiting you. If you do not see them clean their hands, ask them to clean their hands.
- Keep your dressing clean, dry, and intact. Do not remove the dressing to show others your wound.

What do I need to do when I go home from the hospital?

- Before you go home, your doctor or nurse should explain everything you need to know about taking care of your wound. Make sure you understand how to care for your wound before you leave the hospital.
- Always clean your hands before and after caring for your wound.
- Before you go home, make sure you know who to contact if you have questions or problems after you get home.
- Before and after surgery it is important to keep you and your environment as clean as possible. Please use clean bed linens, wear clean clothing, and use disinfectants to clean surfaces such as bathroom fixtures. Please don't allow pets in your bed while you are recovering from surgery.
- If you have any symptoms of an infection, such as redness and pain at the surgery site, drainage, or fever, call your doctor immediately.

PATIENT EDUCATION: SURGICAL SITE INFECTIONS, p. 3

What can I do to prevent other surgical complications?

Pneumonia:

- Notify the doctor's office if you develop a cough or fever before or immediately after surgery.
- After surgery, while you are awake, frequently take deep breaths and cough. This helps keep your lungs clear. If you had abdominal surgery, it may help to splint your incision with a pillow.

Blood clots:

- Depending on the type of surgery you have, your doctor may order special stockings and sleeves to increase blood circulation in your legs.
- Get up and walk as soon as the doctor orders. Walking increases your blood circulation and may help prevent blood clots. Walking also helps prevent pneumonia. Move or flex your feet and legs frequently until you can start walking. Do not stay in one position for long periods.
- If you notice a warm, painful, or swollen area on your leg, call your doctor immediately. If you have additional questions, please ask your doctor or nurse.