



# Preventing surgical wound infections

## A patient's guide

### What is a surgical wound infection?

- There are lots of micro-organisms (bacteria) on our skin and in the environment around us.
- Most of them are harmless, some are good for us, and a very small number of them can cause harm.
- Our skin protects us from bacteria that can cause harm.
- A surgical wound infection can happen when bacteria from the skin or the environment enters the incision (cut) that the surgeon made when they performed your operation.
- There will be signs that the incision (cut) is infected. For example, heat, redness, pain, and swelling.
- In more serious cases you may experience symptoms like a fever or a raised white blood cell count. This happens when your body is fighting off an infection.

### How common are they?

- Surgical wound infections are uncommon.
- A surgical wound infection can develop at any time. From two days after the surgery, or until the wound has healed (usually two to three weeks after the operation).
- Very occasionally, an infection can occur several months after an operation.
- Most surgical wound infections are limited to the skin area, but they can occasionally spread to deeper tissues, beneath the skin.
- Infections are more likely to occur after surgery on/in parts of the body that hold lots of bacteria, such as the gut (stomach, intestines, and colon).

### How will I know if I have a surgical wound infection?

- During your stay in hospital, the nurse who changes your wound dressings will check for any signs of infection.
- If you have a short stay in hospital your GP/district nurse/midwife may check your wound.
- If you are worried about your wound, please tell the person who is looking after you.
- Once you leave hospital, pay attention to how your wound is healing.
- If t you see or feel any of the following, make an appointment to see your GP who will decide if you need treatment:
  - The skin round your wound is red or sore or feels hot and swollen
  - Your wound has a green or yellow discharge (pus)
  - You feel generally unwell or feverish, or you have a high temperature and feel very hot



## What happens if I develop a surgical wound infection?

- If a healthcare worker/GP thinks that you have a surgical wound infection, they may take a sample from your wound and send it to the laboratory for tests.
- You may be prescribed antibiotics as treatment.

## What can you do to help prevent wound infections?

- Practice good basic hygiene – this will help prevent wound infections.
- You will be tested for the MRSA (Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus) bacteria before your surgery. This test is often done several weeks or days before your surgery.
- This involves a cotton bud (swab) rolled inside your nose and another swab of the groin area.
- The swabs are then tested for the presence of the MRSA bacteria.
- If you are found to have the MRSA bacteria on your skin, you will be prescribed a five-day course of antiseptic skin products that can be used to suppress (prevent harm from) the MRSA bacteria
- This will reduce the presence of MRSA bacteria and the risk of these bacteria causing a wound infection.

### Before surgery:

- You must shower or have a bath using the antibacterial soap, the morning of, or night before surgery.

### After surgery:

- **Do not open** the wound dressing for at least three days as you could accidentally transfer bacteria from your fingers to your wound.

## Wound Surveillance

- You may be asked to fill out a post discharge questionnaire about your wound 28 days after your surgery.
- The staff at Whittington Hospital will wash their hands regularly and use alcohol hand rub, which you will see throughout the hospital. Staff receive hand hygiene training regularly.



## Any further information

If you have any further questions, please feel free to speak to:

- Your doctor, nurse or the ward manager
- The infection prevention & control team on 020 7288 3679

UK Health Security Agency website also provides additional information:

[UK Health Security Agency - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

## Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern please contact our PALS team on 020 7288 5551 or [whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net)

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet please email [whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net). We will try our best to meet your needs.

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