

How to Prevent a Surgical Site Infection (SSI)

What is a Surgical Site Infection (SSI)? A surgical site infection is one 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; however, infections can occur in about 1 to 3 out of every 100 surgical patients. Some of the common symptoms of an SSI are:

- redness and pain around the area where you had surgery
- drainage of cloudy fluid from your surgical wound
- fever

Can Surgical Site Infections be treated? Yes. Most SSIs 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 Surgical Site Infections? To prevent SSIs, doctors, nurses and/or other health care providers:

- clean their hands and arms up to their elbows with an antiseptic agent just before your surgery.
- clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub before and after caring for you.
- may remove some of your hair immediately before your surgery using electric clippers if your 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 surgical area clean.
- give you antibiotics before your surgery starts. In most cases, you should get antibiotics within 60 minutes before the surgery starts; the antibiotics should be stopped within 24 hours after surgery.
- clean the skin at the site of your surgery with a special soap that kills germs. You may be asked to shower at home with a special soap that also kills germs.
- will call you the day before surgery to review routine instructions with you. Any questions you may have can be answered at that time. Remember: *no question is too small to ask.*

What can I do to help prevent Surgical Site Infections?

- Follow instructions on pre-operative bathing (if assigned) with an antiseptic soap such as Hibiclens prior to surgery. This can be purchased at most area pharmacies.
 - Bathing/showering should be repeated for at least three days prior to surgery to reduce bacteria on the skin.
 - The whole body should be washed from the neck down to avoid soap getting into the eyes, ears, nose, or mouth.
 - Genital areas should not be washed with antiseptic soap.
 - Lotions or moisturizers should not be used following showering/bathing with antiseptic soap.

Remember: Hand Washing is the single most important thing you can do to prevent infections!

Before your surgery:

- **During your doctors visit, make sure that your health care 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.**
- Tell your doctor about other medical problems you may have. Health problems such as allergies, diabetes and obesity could affect your surgery and your treatment.
- Quit smoking. Patients who smoke get more infections. Talk to your doctor about how you can quit before surgery.
- Do not self-shave near the area in which you will have surgery. Razors can cause small cuts and nicks to skin, many of which may be microscopic and not visible to the human eye. This increases the risk of a wound infection. The facility will use electric clippers if your procedure requires hair removal prior to your procedure.
- If you have questions, write them down and bring them with you to the hospital.

At the time of your surgery:

- **Make sure that your health care 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.**
- Speak up if someone tries to shave you with a razor before surgery. Ask why you need to be shaved and talk with your surgeons 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 do so.
- No one should touch your dressing unless they have been trained to do so.

What do I need to know when I leave the hospital?

- **Always clean your hands before and after caring for your wound.**
- 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 AND dressing before you leave the hospital.
- Before you go home, make sure you know who to contact if you have questions or problems after you get home.
- If you have any symptoms of an infection, such as redness and pain at the surgery site, increased drainage, change in smell or fever, call your doctor immediately.
- If you have any additional questions, please ask your doctor or nurse.

A nurse can be reached at:

- **University of Maryland Upper Chesapeake Medical Center by calling 443-643-3660**
- **University of Maryland Harford Memorial Hospital by calling 443-843-5358**