Monitoring surgical wounds for infection

Information for patients

This leaflet explains surgical wound infection and the national programme for monitoring infections acquired in hospitals.
This hospital is taking part in a national programme so that it can measure its rates of surgical wound infection and be sure that its patients are given the highest possible standard of care. Over 150 hospitals in England currently take part in the national programme, which is called Surgical Site Infection Surveillance Scheme (SSISS). Hospitals monitor infections in different types of operations. The national programme is coordinated by the Health Protection Agency.

1 What is surgical wound infection?

There are lots of micro-organisms (germs) on our skin and in the environment around us. Most of them are harmless, some are beneficial, and a very small proportion can cause harm. Our skin protects us from germs that can cause harm.

A surgical wound infection occurs when germs from the skin or the environment enter the incision (cut) that the surgeon makes through your skin in order to carry out the operation.

2 When do surgical wound infections develop and how common are they?

A surgical wound infection can develop at any time from two to three days after surgery until the wound has healed (usually two to three weeks after the operation). Very occasionally, an infection can occur several months after an operation.

Surgical wound infections are uncommon (see box). Most surgical wound infections are limited to the skin, but can spread occasionally to deeper tissues.

Infections are more likely to occur after surgery on parts of the body that harbour lots of germs, such as the gut.
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 are concerned about your wound, tell the nurse who is looking after you.

Don’t be tempted to remove your dressing, touch your wound or wound drain. You could accidentally transfer germs from your fingers to your wound.

After you leave hospital, you may develop one or more of the symptoms listed below:

- the skin round your wound gets red or sore, or it feels hot and swollen
- your wound has a green or yellow coloured discharge (pus)
- you feel generally unwell or feverish, or you have a temperature

These symptoms could indicate that you have a wound infection. You should tell your family doctor who will decide if you require treatment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of operation</th>
<th>Average number of infected wounds in every 100 operations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>knee joint replacement</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hip joint replacement</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coronary artery bypass graft</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>bowel (gut) surgery</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
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Data source: Surveillance of surgical site infection in English hospitals 1997-2003
What happens if I develop a surgical wound infection?

If the nurse or doctor suspects that you have a surgical wound infection, they may take a sample from the surface of your wound with a swab and send it to the laboratory for tests. Your nurse or doctor may prescribe treatment with antibiotics.

What information is passed to the Health Protection Agency?

No information that can be used to identify you, such as your name, address or postcode, is passed to the Health Protection Agency.

This hospital passes information about your operation to the Health Protection Agency as part of the national programme for monitoring surgical site infection. The information is related to the risk of developing surgical wound infection. The risk depends on many factors, and includes the following:

- your age and sex
- your general medical condition before the operation
- type of operation
- how long the operation lasted
- whether or not you developed a surgical wound infection, and if so, which type of germ caused it

What does the Health Protection Agency do with the information?

The Health Protection Agency collects information from the hospitals taking part in the national programme. The information is used to calculate rates of surgical wound infection for different types of operations. Hospitals can then compare their rates to national rates and decide where they may need to make improvements.
7 What else does the Health Protection Agency do?

The Health Protection Agency is an independent body that protects the health and well-being of everyone in England and Wales.

The Agency plays a critical role in protecting people from infectious diseases and in preventing harm when hazards involving chemicals, poisons or radiation occur.

8 Where can I get further information about infections in hospital?

The Health Protection Agency publishes information each year on surgical wound infections. The latest report is available on the website.


The Health Protection Agency website has a section on healthcare associated infections. This includes a factsheet on the mandatory surveillance of orthopaedic surgical wound infections and a protocol for the surveillance of surgical site infections.

www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics_az/hai/menu.htm

The Chief Medical Officer published his strategy for reducing hospital acquired infection in December 2003. It is available on the Department of Health website.

www.dh.gov.uk

This leaflet is based on one that was developed by Kath Verlander and Marion Willcocks, East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust.
If you have any further questions, please contact

Health Protection Agency
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