

SURGICAL SITE INFECTION



Avoid touching your wound and try to keep it clean and dry

– if you need to check your wound, always wash your hands with soap and water and dry with a fresh, clean towel. This helps prevent introducing bacteria to the wound site.

Tell us if you are worried about your wound – tell the nurse or doctor caring for you if you are worried about your wound at any time.

How do I know if I have a wound infection?

To help you check for a wound infection, watch for the following signs and symptoms around the wound, including:

- redness
- swelling
- heat from the wound site
- increased pain
- thick or discoloured discharge from the wound such as pus
- an unpleasant smell from the wound.

You may also have a fever, chills or flu-like symptoms, nausea, vomiting or pain that is more than what you might normally expect after your operation.

What should I do if I have any of these symptoms?

If you are in hospital, tell your nurse or doctor. They will check your wound and if needed, they may do other tests (such as a wound swab or blood tests) to see if you have an infection in your wound.

Your nurse or doctor may take a swab from the surface of the wound and send it to a laboratory for testing. You might also be given some antibiotics.

If you are out of hospital and you are worried about your wound contact your GP, the out-of-hours GP service, emergency department, your surgical team or your hospital's surgical site infection (SSI) nurse (if there is one).

Further information

You may also like to read more about surgical site infection on our website: https://assets.hse.ie/media/documents/PSS-Recognising_surgical_site_infection_at_home.pdf

https://assets.hse.ie/media/documents/Surgical_antibiotic_prophylaxis_patient_information_leaflet.pdf

This health information is for general purposes only. Please talk to your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.



SURGICAL SITE INFECTION



This leaflet tells you about surgical site infections (also called surgical wound infections). It tells you how your nurses and doctors will reduce your risk of getting an infection and how you can help reduce your risk. This leaflet also gives you advice on what to do if you think you might have a surgical site infection.

What is a surgical site infection?

A surgical site infection is when you get an infection on the part of the body where the surgery took place. This could be a wound infection where bacteria (bugs) from your skin, or from somewhere around you, get into the cut that was made through your skin for your operation. Most bugs are harmless, but some can cause infections.

Very rarely, bacteria can cause infection deeper in your body. These deeper infections are more likely to happen after surgery on parts of the body that have lots of bacteria, such as the bowel.

When do surgical site infections develop?

A surgical site infection can develop any time from 2 to 3 days after an operation and up to when the wound has healed (usually 2 to 3 weeks after the operation). Sometimes an infection can happen a number of weeks after an operation. This could happen if you have a replacement such as a hip or a knee replacement.

There are things that your nurses and doctors will do, and things that you can do, that will help reduce the risk of getting a surgical site infection.

What do nurses and doctors do to reduce the risk of a surgical site infection?

To help reduce the risk of a surgical site infection, your nurse or doctor may:

Remove some hair (only if needed) – if they need to, your nurse or doctor will remove hair near the site of your surgery (don't do this yourself). They will use electric clippers (with a disposable head) on the day of your surgery, likely just before you go to the operating theatre.

Prescribe antibiotics – your doctor may prescribe antibiotics for you just before and sometimes during the operation to further reduce the risk of developing an infection. For most operations, you will only need one dose of antibiotic about an hour before you have your operation.

Clean skin – the nurse or doctor will clean your skin with an antiseptic solution before they make a cut in your skin.

Keep everything sterile – the nurses and doctors will use sterile (cleared of all bacteria) instruments and wear sterile gowns and gloves, and a surgical mask and cap during your operation. They will also cover your wound with a sterile dressing. You need to leave it in place for at least 48 hours.

Your nurse and doctor will clean their hands before touching your wound and will use special techniques to prevent bacteria getting into it when inspecting or changing your dressing.

Tell you about follow up care – your nurse or doctor will tell you how to look after your surgical wound and about any appointments you need after you leave the hospital. You may be asked to take part in a surgical site infection surveillance programme. If you take part, your doctor or nurse will explain what is involved.



What can I do to reduce my risk of infection?

To help reduce the risk of a surgical site infection, you need to follow any written advice you get before or after your operation. Ask questions if you would like help understanding or reading it.

Shower or bathe – have a bath or shower on the day of and / or night before your operation. This is to make sure all your skin is clean. If your nurse or doctor asks you to use a special antibacterial soap or wipes, please use them.

Do not use lotions, creams, make-up or scents – after your pre-surgery wash, do not put on any lotions, moisturisers, fake tan, perfume, or make-up.

Do not shave or wax the area – do not shave or wax the area where surgery will be performed for at least 3 days before your operation (you risk irritating your skin and creating a cut for bugs to get in). Your nurse will guide you if hair removal is necessary.

Tell us if you had an allergic reaction to penicillin – if you think you have had an allergy to penicillin, please let your nurse or doctor know. They will ask you for more information about the past reaction to help them understand what happened and to decide if you had an allergy or some other kind of reaction. This helps them give you the correct antibiotic before and / or during your surgery to help prevent infection.

See more tips on the back page

