

Preventing Surgical Site Infections

Fact Sheet for Patients



Surgical site infections can be prevented if care is taken before, during, and after surgery.

This fact sheet provides you with tips to help prevent a surgical site infection. If you have additional questions, please ask your healthcare provider.

What is a surgical site infection (SSI)?

A surgical site infection occurs when harmful bacteria (germs) enter the body through the surgical site (any cut the surgeon makes in the skin to perform the surgery). Most patients who have surgery do not develop an infection. However, infections can develop in about 1 to 3 percent of patients who have surgery.

What are the risk factors for an SSI?

The risk of developing an SSI is higher if you:

- Are an older adult
- Have a weakened immune system or other serious health problem such as diabetes
- Are malnourished
- Are overweight
- Smoke
- Already have a skin infection somewhere on your body

What are the signs and symptoms of an SSI?

- Redness, heat, and/or swelling around the surgical site
- Pus from the surgical site
- Increased pain or tenderness at the surgical site
- Chills/fever with a temperature greater than 38°C or 100.4°F

If you experience any of the symptoms listed above, call your healthcare provider.

Bring the Post Surgical Follow-up Tool with you to your appointment, if one is scheduled.

What can I do to prevent an SSI?

Before your surgery:

- Tell your surgeon if any skin infection, rash or sores develop before your surgery.
- Do not shave or wax near the surgical site for one week before your surgery. This can irritate your skin and make it easier to develop an infection.
- If you have diabetes, ensure your blood glucose (sugar) levels are controlled 48 hours before and after your surgery.
- Stop smoking at least 24 hours before your surgery.
- Take a bath or shower the night before your surgery or follow the directions given by your healthcare provider.

After discharge from the hospital:

- Ask your healthcare provider to explain everything you need to know about taking care of your surgical site. **Ask for clarification if you are unsure or don't remember.**
- Make sure you know **whom to contact, and what number to call**, if you have any questions or problems after you get home. If you are unsure or don't remember, call HealthLine at 811 and they can further assist you.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before and after caring for your surgical site.
- Avoid tight clothing that may rub and irritate your surgical site.
- Do not allow visitors to touch your surgical site.
- Pets may be comforting, but may also be curious about your surgical site. Do not allow your pet to lick or touch your surgical site.

What are healthcare providers doing to prevent SSIs?

Healthcare providers:

- May give you antibiotics before your surgery starts
- If necessary, remove hair around your surgical site with clippers – they should not shave you with a razor
- Wear special hair covers, masks, gowns, and gloves during surgery to keep the surgery area clean
- Clean the skin at your surgical site with a special soap that kills bacteria (germs)
- Keep you warm during surgery
- Monitor your glucose (sugar) levels during and after surgery if you are diabetic
- Clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub before and after caring for you

Additional Online Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

http://www.cdc.gov/HAI/pdfs/ssi/SSI_tagged.pdf

Ontario Hospital Association

http://www.oha.com/CurrentIssues/keyinitiatives/PatientSafety/Documents/8c%20SSI_fs_patients_families_MOHLTC.pdf

Safer Healthcare Now! Prevent Surgical Site Infections Getting Started Kit

<http://www.saferhealthcarenow.ca/EN/Interventions/SSI/Documents/SSI%20Getting%20Started%20Kit.pdf>