

## PERI ANESTHESIA CARE DEPARTMENT- SURGICAL SERVICES

### PREVENTING SURGICAL SITE INFECTIONS AFTER SURGERY

#### Discharge Instructions: After Your Surgery

#### Lowering the risk of a surgical site infection

##### What is a surgical site infection?

A "surgical site" is the part of the body where surgery was done. When the doctor makes a cut in the skin during surgery, this is called an "incision." Doctors also use the term "surgical wound."

If germs like bacteria get into the body through a surgical wound, it can cause infection. This is called a surgical site infection. It might only affect the skin, or it might spread deeper into the body.

A surgical site infection can start at any time, from a few days to a few weeks after the surgery. The infection can spread deeper into the body if it is not treated. A surgical site infection can make you feel unwell and can lead to serious health problems. It can also cause the incision to open again.

##### What increases my risk of a surgical site infection?

You are at a higher risk for a surgical site infection:

- If you have or recently had an infection in any part of your body
- If you smoke
- As you get older
- **If you are not able to get enough nutrients through eating**
- **If you have a weak immune system** – This can happen from things like chemotherapy, radiation, or an organ transplant.
- **If you have certain health conditions** – Examples include diabetes, heart problems, sickle cell disease, or poor circulation.
- **If you have edema** – This is swelling that happens when fluid collects in the small spaces around tissues and organs inside the body.
- **If you have excess body weight**

##### How do I lower my risk of a surgical site infection?

It might not be possible to prevent a surgical site infection, but there are things you can do to lower your risk. The doctors and nurses who care for you will also take steps to lower your risk of infection.

Here are some general tips:

- Take care of your general health.

- If you have a health condition, like diabetes, follow all of your doctor's instructions for how to care for yourself. Some health conditions can affect wound healing.
- Eat a healthy diet. Your body needs protein and other nutrients from the food you eat to help. This helps with wound healing and helps to prevent **infections**. If your doctor asks you to take food supplements, take them as instructed.
- Get lots of rest. Sleep when you feel tired. Avoid doing tiring activities.
- Stop smoking. If you are having trouble quitting, at least try to cut back. Your doctor or nurse can help you. For some types of surgery, any kind of nicotine should be avoided. This includes nicotine gum, patches, and e-cigarettes.
- Wear loose clothing. Good blood flow is important for healing.

#### Some tips for before your surgery:

- Tell your doctor if you already have an **infection**. Even something like a cold or sore throat can raise your risk of getting a **surgical site infection**. Tell your doctor if you are having any problems urinating.
- Wash your hair and take a bath or shower before your surgery. Your doctor might have you use special soap or shampoo. Also, talk to your doctor about any **infections** you had in the past. They might prescribe medicines for you to take before, during, and after your surgery.
- If you are asked to remove hair from the **surgical site**, clip the hair with scissors or electrical clippers. Do not shave the area with a razor.
- Do not use lotions, powders, hair spray, or makeup before your surgery.
- If your doctor gives you antibiotics before your surgery, take them as instructed. Do not miss any doses.

#### Some tips for after your surgery:

- Wash your hands before and after you touch your wound or bandage (figure 1). If you are in the hospital, visitors and staff should always wash their hands before and after they come in your room or touch your bandages. If you do not see someone wash their hands, ask them to.
- Tell your doctor right away if you see signs of **infection** or feel sick.
- Learn how to care for your incision. Your doctor will talk to you about:
  - When you can take a bath or shower after surgery
  - When you should change your bandages. Do not remove your bandages unless your doctor says to. If you go home with a bandage:
    - Store the supplies in a clean bag or cabinet.
    - Change the bandage in a clean area.
    - Throw away the old bandage right away and wash your hands.
  - How to care for your stitches, staples, or drains (if you have these), and when they will be removed

- If your doctor prescribed medicines for **infection**, follow all instructions for how and when to take them. Take all of the medicine, even if you start feeling better.
- You might need to limit your activity after surgery to help with wound healing. Avoid stretching and pulling activities that could cause your incision to open up. The doctor might also ask you to avoid lifting, straining, exercise, or sports for a time after surgery.
- Do not swim or soak your incision in water until it has fully healed and your doctor says it is OK. Dirty water can get in the wound and can cause **infection**.

### **When should I call the doctor?**

Call your doctor or nurse for advice if:

- You have any signs of a general **infection** – These include **a fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher, or chills.**
- You have any signs of a wound **infection** like:
  - ✓ **Swelling**
  - ✓ **Redness**
  - ✓ **Warmth around the wound**
  - ✓ **Bad pain when you touch the wound**
  - ✓ **Drainage from the wound that looks like pus or is yellow, green, or bloody**
  - ✓ **A bad smell coming from the wound**
  - ✓ **The edges of the wound coming apart or opening up**

Reference (s): Lippincott Solutions (Walters Kluwer, 2025)

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