



STOP INFECTIONS NOW

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PROTECT YOURSELF.

15 STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO REDUCE YOUR RISK OF A HOSPITAL INFECTION.

Most of us will have to go into the hospital some day. Here are specific steps you can follow to protect yourself from deadly hospital infections:

1. Ask that hospital staff clean their hands before treating you, and ask visitors to clean their hands too. This is the single most important way to protect yourself in the hospital. If you're worried about being too aggressive, just remember your life could be at stake. All caregivers should clean their hands before treating you. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are more effective at removing most bacteria than soap and water. Do not hesitate to say: "Excuse me, but there's an alcohol dispenser right there. Would you mind using that before you touch me, so I can see it?" Don't be falsely assured by gloves. If caregivers have pulled on gloves without cleaning their hands first, the gloves are already contaminated before they touch you. Soap and water is better at preventing *C. Difficile*. Patients should wash their hands before meals, or be assisted to do so if they are bed-ridden.

2. Before your doctor uses a stethoscope, ask that the diaphragm (the flat surface) be wiped with alcohol. Stethoscopes are often contaminated with *Staphylococcus aureus* and other dangerous bacteria, because caregivers seldom take the time to clean them in between patient use.

3. If you need a "central line" catheter, ask your doctor about the benefits of one that is antibiotic-impregnated or silver-chlorhexidine coated to reduce infections.

4. If you need surgery, choose a surgeon with a low infection rate. Surgeons know their rate of infection for various procedures. Don't be afraid to ask for it.

5. Beginning three to five days before surgery, shower or bathe daily with chlorhexidine soap. Various brands can be bought without a prescription. It will help remove any dangerous bacteria you may be carrying on your own skin.

6. Ask your surgeon to have you tested for methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) at least one week before you come into the hospital. Your G.P. will do this for you as well. If you have it, extra precautions can be taken to protect you from infection.

7. Stop smoking well in advance of your surgery. Patients who smoke are three times as likely to develop a surgical site infection as nonsmokers, and have significantly slower recoveries and longer hospital stays.

8. Before your operation, discuss with your doctor the issue of antibiotic use. For many types of surgery, a pre-surgical antibiotic is the standard of care, but it is often overlooked by busy hospital staff. However, the excessive use of antibiotics is implicated in the causes of HCAs and *C. difficile* in particular.

9. Ask your doctor about keeping you warm during surgery. Operating rooms are often kept cold, but for many types of surgery, patients who are kept warm resist infection better. This can be done with special blankets, hats and booties, and warmed IV liquids.

10. Do not shave the surgical site. Razors can create small nicks in the skin, through which bacteria can enter. If hair must be removed before surgery, ask that clippers be used instead of a razor. There is research to support this strategy.

11. Avoid touching your hands to your mouth, and do not set food or utensils on furniture or bed sheets. Make sure your table is clean. Germs such as "C. Diff" can live for many days on surfaces and can cause infections if they get into your mouth.

12. Ask your doctor about monitoring your glucose (sugar) levels continuously during and after surgery, especially if you are having cardiac surgery. The stress of surgery often makes glucose levels spike erratically.

SINNER CONTACTS ST

Limerick

Tom Collins 087 9895383
collins82@hotmail.com

North Tipperary

Anne Grace 067 23697
annegrace@eircom.net

South East

Teresa Graham 051386651
tvgraham@gofree.indigo.ie

When blood glucose levels are tightly controlled, heart patients resist infection better. Continue monitoring even when you are discharged from the hospital, because you are not fully healed yet.

13. Avoid a urinary tract catheter if possible. It is a common cause of infection. The tube allows urine to flow from your bladder out of your body. Sometimes catheters are used when busy hospital staff don't have time to walk patients to the bathroom. If you have a catheter, ask your caregiver to remove it as soon as possible.

14. If you must have an IV, make sure that it's inserted and removed under clean conditions and changed every 3 to 4 days. Your skin should be cleaned at the site of insertion, and the person treating you should be wearing clean gloves. Alert hospital staff immediately if any redness appears. [14]

15. If you are planning to have your baby by Cesarean section, follow the steps listed above as if you were having any other type of surgery.

Ideally, you would choose a hospital with a low infection rate, and going private is not always a protection. Good luck getting that information. It is difficult. MRSA blood stream infection is notifiable since 2004, but wound, bone and lung infections from MRSA are not reported. C. difficile is notifiable since May 4th this year, but the figures for individual hospitals are hard to come by. There needs to be a clear record for each hospital of the HCAs incurred in that hospital, and this should be available to the patient or prospective patient risk. It is unfair (and dangerous) to prevent the public from knowing which hospitals have infection epidemics. Keeping infection rates secret may help hospitals save face, but it won't save lives.

(Adapted by kind permission of Betsy McCaughey, PhD. www.hospitalinfection.org 2008)

