



# A guide to...

## Surgical Site Infections *Patient Information*

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## **What are surgical site infections and how are they caused?**

Surgical Site Infection (SSI) is a term used to describe wound infections that specifically affect surgical wounds.

There are lots of micro-organisms (germs) on our skin, in our bodies 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.

Most SSIs occur when germs from the skin or the environment enter the incision (cut) that the surgeon makes through the skin in order to perform an operation. On rarer occasions, SSIs can be caused by germs from another area inside the body that travel through the bloodstream to the site of the operation (known as haematogenous seeding).

Most SSIs are limited to the skin but can occasionally spread to deeper tissues.

## **What increases the risk of developing an SSI?**

You are more likely to develop an SSI if you:

- Are a smoker
- Are diabetic
- Are on steroids
- Are obese
- Are malnourished
- Are elderly
- Have a skin condition
- Have an underlying disease which affects immunity or wound healing
- Have a pre-existing infection prior to operation (for example urinary tract infection, respiratory tract infection, gastroenteritis etc)
- Are undergoing a surgical procedure that is complex
- Are undergoing a surgical procedure on a part of the body that has a lot of germs, such as the gut.

## **How can we reduce the risk of SSI?**

In order to minimise your risk of developing SSI, it is advisable to do the following:

- Stop smoking
- Maintain a Healthy diet
- Keep warm on the day of surgery
- Have a wash or shower on the day of your surgery (avoid applying creams/lotions afterwards)
- Avoid shaving the area where you are having your surgery
- Report any pre-existing signs or symptoms of infection to nursing/medical staff (contact your G.P for treatment before your admission if you are due to have planned surgery)

- Maintain good hand hygiene using the facilities provided (sinks, hand gels and hand wipes) and avoid touching/interfering with your wound or dressing.

In addition to these steps, the healthcare professionals responsible for your care may also:

- Provide you with an antimicrobial washcloth/body wash and instructions on how to use
- Give you antibiotics in theatre prior to your operation
- Disinfect your skin in theatre using an antiseptic solution
- Leave your wound dressing undisturbed for the first 48 hours after surgery.

### **What are the signs and symptoms of SSI?**

During the first few days (or longer depending on the type of surgery) after your surgery, you may have some pain, swelling, redness and warmth to your surgical site. On most occasions, this is an expected part of the healing process and should get better as time goes on.

However, you may have developed a Surgical Site Infection if you notice any of the following:

- Worsening redness, pain, warmth or swelling to your wound
- Your wound is gaping, opening up or not healing as expected
- Your wound is discharging green or yellow liquid (pus)
- You feel generally unwell or have a temperature/fever.

### **Monitoring your wound during your hospital stay**

Your surgical site will be monitored regularly for infection by the nurses/midwives and doctors responsible for your care throughout your hospital stay.

If you have any concerns about your wound during this period, please tell the nurse, midwife or doctor looking after you.

It is very important that you avoid touching your wound or disturbing your dressing as this could transfer germs from your hands to your wound, which could cause infection.

### **What happens if I develop symptoms?**

If the nurse, midwife or doctor suspects that you have a surgical site 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. If your infection is severe, affects the deeper tissues, and/or does not respond to antibiotic treatment, you may require further surgery to manage the infection.

### **What to do after you leave hospital**

When you are well enough to go home, the nurse/midwife discharging you will provide you with instructions on how to look after your wound/dressing when you are at home.

You may be asked to attend your practice nurse, or referred to a district nurse for dressing changes.

If you have a problem with your wound once you've left hospital, please contact your doctor or GP immediately, unless you have been told to contact the hospital/ward directly.

You can also call NHS 111 or contact the team/ward who cared for you for clinical advice.