

What You Need to Know about Infections after Surgery: *A Fact Sheet for Patients and Their Family Members*

What is a Surgical Site Infection (SSI)?

1. An infection is considered to be an SSI when it occurs at the site of surgery within 30 days of an operation or within 1 year of an operation if a foreign body (e.g., an artificial heart valve or joint) is implanted as part of the surgery.
2. Most SSIs (about 70%) are superficial infections involving the skin only. The remaining infections are more serious and can involve tissues under the skin, organs, or implanted material.
3. The majority of SSIs do not become life-threatening.

Most patients who have surgery do well. But sometimes patients get infections. Patients and their family members can help lower the risk of infection after surgery. Here are some ways:

Days or weeks before surgery:

1. Patients should maintain a healthy weight.
2. Stop smoking at least 30 days prior to surgery.
3. Work with their doctors to keep blood sugar levels under control if diabetic.

The day or night before surgery:

1. Do not shave any part of your body 24 hours before surgery. Shaving can irritate your skin which may lead to infection.
2. Take a shower or bath the day before surgery.
3. Keep warm. This means wearing warm clothes or wrapping up in blankets when you go to the hospital. Keeping warm before surgery lowers your chance of getting an infection.

At the time of surgery:

1. Tell the anesthesiologist (doctor or nurse who puts you to sleep for surgery) about all the medications you take. A good way to do this is with an up-to date medication list.
2. Let the anesthesiologist know if you have diabetes or high blood sugar. People with high blood sugar have a greater chance of getting infections after surgery.
3. We give you warm blankets before, during, and after surgery, ask for extra blankets if you feel cold.
4. Ask if you will get antibiotic medicine. If so, find out how much medicine you will get. Most people are on antibiotics for just one day as taking too much can lead to other problems.

What are the signs and symptoms of an SSI?

1. Signs and symptoms of an SSI can include fever and redness, swelling, heat, or pain at the surgical wound site.
2. Drainage of cloudy fluid or sudden opening of the surgical wound can also suggest an SSI.

You can learn more about Surgical Site Infection at the 5 Million Lives Campaign at www.ihl.org and CDC's Healthcare Infection Control and Prevention Advisory Committee (HICPAC) at (http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/gl_surgicalsitere.html*)