



Preventing surgical wound infections

A patient's guide

What is a surgical wound infection?

- There are lots of micro-organisms (bacteria) on our skin and in the environment around us.
- Most of them are harmless, some are good for us, and a very small number of them can cause harm.
- Our skin protects us from bacteria that can cause harm.
- A surgical wound infection can happen when bacteria from the skin or the environment enters the incision (cut) that the surgeon made when they performed your operation.
- There will be signs that the incision (cut) is infected. For example, heat, redness, pain, and swelling.
- In more serious cases you may experience symptoms like a fever or a raised white blood cell count. This happens when your body is fighting off an infection.

How common are they?

- Surgical wound infections are uncommon.
- A surgical wound infection can develop at any time. From two days after the surgery, or until the wound has healed (usually two to three weeks after the operation).
- Very occasionally, an infection can occur several months after an operation.
- Most surgical wound infections are limited to the skin area, but they can occasionally spread to deeper tissues, beneath the skin.
- Infections are more likely to occur after surgery on/in parts of the body that hold lots of bacteria, such as the gut (stomach, intestines, and colon).

How will I know if I have a surgical wound infection?

- During your stay in hospital, the nurse who changes your wound dressings will check for any signs of infection.
- If you have a short stay in hospital your GP/district nurse/midwife may check your wound.
- If you are worried about your wound, please tell the person who is looking after you.
- Once you leave hospital, pay attention to how your wound is healing.
- If t you see or feel any of the following, make an appointment to see your GP who will decide if you need treatment:
 - The skin round your wound is red or sore or feels hot and swollen
 - Your wound has a green or yellow discharge (pus)
 - You feel generally unwell or feverish, or you have a high temperature and feel very hot



What happens if I develop a surgical wound infection?

- If a healthcare worker/GP thinks that you have a surgical wound infection, they may take a sample from your wound and send it to the laboratory for tests.
- You may be prescribed antibiotics as treatment.

What can you do to help prevent wound infections?

- Practice good basic hygiene – this will help prevent wound infections.
- You will be tested for the MRSA (Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus) bacteria before your surgery. This test is often done several weeks or days before your surgery.
- This involves a cotton bud (swab) rolled inside your nose and another swab of the groin area.
- The swabs are then tested for the presence of the MRSA bacteria.
- If you are found to have the MRSA bacteria on your skin, you will be prescribed a five-day course of antiseptic skin products that can be used to suppress (prevent harm from) the MRSA bacteria
- This will reduce the presence of MRSA bacteria and the risk of these bacteria causing a wound infection.

Before surgery:

- You must shower or have a bath using the antibacterial soap, the morning of, or night before surgery.

After surgery:

- **Do not open** the wound dressing for at least three days as you could accidentally transfer bacteria from your fingers to your wound.

Wound Surveillance

- You may be asked to fill out a post discharge questionnaire about your wound 28 days after your surgery.
- The staff at Whittington Hospital will wash their hands regularly and use alcohol hand rub, which you will see throughout the hospital. Staff receive hand hygiene training regularly.



Any further information

If you have any further questions, please feel free to speak to:

- Your doctor, nurse or the ward manager
- The infection prevention & control team on 020 7288 3679

UK Health Security Agency website also provides additional information:

[UK Health Security Agency - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern please contact our PALS team on 020 7288 5551 or whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet please email whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net. We will try our best to meet your needs.

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