



Monitoring surgical wounds for infection

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Version 8

> About this leaflet

The purpose of this leaflet is to provide you with information on what to expect from your wound and care for your surgical wounds following surgery. Although the risk of infection is low it also describes how to monitor your wounds for infection and what to do if you have any concerns.

> What is surgical wound infection?

There are lots of micro-organisms (germs) on our skin and in the environment around us. Most of them are harmless, some are beneficial, and a very small number can cause harm. Our skin protects us from germs that can cause harm. A surgical wound infection occurs when germs from the skin or the environment enter the incision (cut) that the surgeon makes through your skin in order to carry out your operation.

When do surgical wound infections develop and how common are they?

A surgical wound infection can develop at any time from two or three days after surgery until the wound has completely healed (usually two or three weeks after the operation). Very occasionally, an infection can occur several months after an operation.

Surgical wound infections are uncommon. Most surgical wound infections are limited to the skin, but can spread occasionally to deeper tissues.

Infections are more likely to occur after surgery on parts of the body that harbour lots of germs, such as the gut.

What can I expect from my wounds?

- Your scars may feel itchy or numb as they are healing but this is normal. Do not scratch or pick your wounds as this can introduce infection.

It is important that you:

- Don't try to remove your sutures. Some sutures will dissolve on their own. If you notice a small bit of suturing poking out through your incision, leave it alone do not try to touch this or try to pull or cut it.

- Protect your incisions from the sun. Incisions may sunburn easily. While they're healing, keep your incisions covered with loose clothing when you're in the sun. After they heal, use sunscreen. Sun exposure can cause scar tissue to darken further.

If you have a chest wound as a result of cardiac surgery:

- You may notice a swollen area at the top of the chest wound. This will reduce and settle as the wound heals.
- We actively encourage ladies regardless of breast size to support their chest wound by wearing non wired bra.
- Support your wound when coughing, the hospital physiotherapist will show you how to do this.

What can you do to reduce the risk of a surgical site infection?

The week before coming to hospital you can reduce the risk of infection by:

- If you have an infection before your surgery such as a chest infection, urine infection or a skin infection near where the surgical incision may be contact your GP to ensure that it's cleared before surgery.
- Studies have shown that shaving near/on your incision site increases the risk of infection. Please don't shave your arms/legs/ or groin area. Shaving increases, the risk of infection. If hair removal is required, ward staff will do this with clippers.

While in hospital, to help reduce this risk you can:

- Have a shower on the day of your operation and dry with a clean towel. This will make sure your skin is clean and reduce the number of bacteria on your skin prior to surgery.
- Tell the nurse who is caring for you if you are worried about your wound.
- When in hospital don't be tempted to remove your dressing, or touch your wounds. You could accidentally transfer germs from your fingers to your wound.
- When showering after surgery, wash from the neck downwards and do not use a cloth or sponge over the wound.
- If you have a chest wound, support this when coughing and try to face away from your wound.
- Before you are discharged from hospital, your surgical wounds will be checked and dressings normally removed. If your nurse feels it is necessary for your wound to remain dressed, they will make an appointment with your practice nurse or the district nurse to check your wound and redress it as appropriate.

When you have been discharged home, help reduce this risk and protect your newly healing wound by:

- When showering wash with water and unperfumed soap, but do not rub the wound- pat it dry with a clean towel
- Do not use cream/talc's on your wound
- Avoid overstretching/reaching that may stretch your newly healing tissue
- Avoid touching your wound until it is healed, it is important that you wash your hands before and after touching your wound.

What do we do in hospital to reduce the risk of infection?

- Screen you for carriage of micro-organisms (germs) such as Staphylococcus aureus, and those that are resistant to a lot of antibiotics such as Meticillin Resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) and Carbapenem – Resistant Organisms (CRO).
- Give you antibiotics just before the operation.
- Your skin will be cleaned with an antiseptic solution in the operating theatre before the incision is made.
- We use sterile instruments and sterile gowns and gloves during your operation.
- Your wound will be covered with a dressing which should be left in place for a minimum of 48hrs.
- If you think a member of staff may have forgotten to wash their hands or use hand rub before handling your dressing, drain or wound, please remind them. Staff will not mind being reminded of the importance of cleaning their hands.

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

During your stay in hospital, the staff member who changes your wound dressings will check for any signs of infection. If you are concerned about your wound, tell the nurse or doctor who is looking after you. Don't be tempted to remove your dressing or touch your wounds or you could accidentally transfer germs from your fingers to your wound.

After you leave hospital, it is important to look out for one or more of the symptoms of infection:

It is normal for your wound to be a little inflamed/painful a few days following surgery this is the body beginning to heal itself, however if skin around your wound gets increasingly red or sore, or it feels hot and swollen this could be a sign of infection.

Other signs include:

- Green or yellow coloured discharge (pus) leaking from the wound;
- The wound opens up or separates
- You feel generally unwell or feverish, or you have a temperature.

These symptoms could indicate that you have a wound infection and it is important that this is treated promptly to prevent the infection worsening. You should contact your GP or NHS24 out of hours if you have any of these symptoms. Your GP or District Nurse can also contact the hospital for advice if required.

Our hospital team may also give you specific advice about contacting the team direct in these instances.

National Screening Programme

All acute hospitals in Scotland, including NHS Golden Jubilee, are currently take part in a National Programme, which is called Scottish Surveillance of Healthcare Associated Infection Programme (SSHAIP), and is coordinated by Antimicrobial Resistance and Healthcare Associated Infection (ARHAI) Scotland.

This hospital passes information about your operation to ARHAI as part of the National Programme for monitoring surgical site infection in cardiac and orthopaedic surgery. The information is related to the risks of developing surgical wound infection. The risk depends on many factors and includes the following:

- your age and sex;
- your general medical condition before the operation;
- type of operation;
- how long the operation lasted; and
- whether or not you developed a surgical wound infection and if so,
- which type of germ caused it.

No information that can be used to identify you, such as your name, address or postcode, is passed to the ARHAI.

What does ARHAI do with the information?

The Scottish Surveillance of Health Associated Infection Programme (SSHAIP) collects information from the hospitals on behalf of ARHAI.

The information is used to calculate rates of surgical wound infection for different types of operations. Hospitals can then compare their rates to national rates and decide where they may need to make improvements or share good practice.

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