

March 23, 2011

Surgical Site Infections Fact Sheet

- 1. What is a surgical site infection? A surgical site infection (SSI) is an infection that occurs after surgery in the part of the body where the surgery took place. About 300,000 SSIs occur each year. While most surgeries do not result in infection; about 1-3 patients out of every 100 who have surgery currently develop SSIs.
- 2. What causes SSI's? Surgery involves the opening of one of the body's main barriers to infection, the skin. Pathogens from either the patient themselves or from an outside source, such as the environment, can more easily enter the body through the incision site or by way of implanted tissue or an implanted device and therefore cause infection.
- 3. **How serious are surgical site infections?** SSIs can be superficial, involving the skin only, or be more serious and involve deep tissues under the skin, organs, or implanted material. SSIs are a source of serious illness and even death, and result in additional postoperative hospital days and sometimes long-term disability.
- 4. What are the symptoms of surgical site infections? Redness and pain around the area where you had surgery, drainage of cloudy fluid from your surgical wound, and fever.
- 5. **Are there risk factors for SSIs?** Yes An SSI is more likely to occur if the patient has an underlying health problem or condition. Also if the surgical site is not clean (i.e. emergency surgery after injury). And the duration of the surgery (i.e. SSI risk increases with longer procedures).
- 6. **How are SSIs diagnosed?** Sometimes SSIs are clinically apparent. However, to determine the specific cause of the infection, specimens must be collected and tested in the laboratory. Certain radiologic (X-ray) procedures can also help with the diagnosis.
- 7. **Is there treatment for surgical site infections?** Yes. Most SSIs can be treated with antibiotics, targeted to the organism causing the infection. Some patients may need additional surgery to treat the infection or remove or replace the implanted tissue or device.
- 8. **Are surgical site infections preventable?** Yes, there are a number of guidelines doctors, nurses and other healthcare providers follow to prevent SSIs including:
 - a. Cleaning hands and arms up to elbows with antiseptic agent just before surgery.
 - b. Cleaning hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub before and after caring for each patient.
 - c. If indicated, remove some of your hair around the surgical site immediately before surgery using electric clippers (not with a razor).



- d. Wear special hair covers, masks, gowns, and gloves during surgery.
- e. When indicated, give patients needed antibiotics before surgery starts. In most cases, the patient should get antibiotics within 60 minutes before the surgery starts and should be stopped within 24 hours after surgery.
- f. Clean the skin at the site of surgery with a special soap that kills germs.

Additionally, there are steps the patient can take before and after surgery to help prevent SSIs:

- a. Tell your doctor about other medical problems you may have including allergies and diabetes.
- b. Quit smoking. Patients who smoke get more infections..
- c. Do not shave near where you will have surgery. Shaving with a razor can irritate skin and make it easier to develop an infection.
- d. Speak up if someone tries to shave you with a razor before surgery. Ask why you need to be shaved and talk with your surgeon if you have concerns.
- e. After surgery, if you do not see your providers clean their hands, please ask them to do so.
- f. Family and friends who visit should not touch surgical wounds or dressings.
- g. Family and friends should clean hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub before, and after visiting you. If you do not see them clean their hands, ask them to.
- h. Make sure you understand how to care for your wound before leaving the hospital.
- i. Always clean your hands before and after caring for your wound.
- j. Know who to contact if you have questions or problems when you get home.
- k. Call your doctor immediately if you have any symptoms of an post-surgical infection.

9. For more information about Surgical Site Infections:

http://www.cdc.gov/HAI/ssi/ssi.html

This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician for specific clinical information.