



## **HEALTHCARE ASSOCIATED INFECTIONS (HAI) FACT SHEET**

### **What is a Healthcare Associated Infection?**

A healthcare associated infection is an infection that a person gets while staying as a patient in a hospital or other healthcare facility. Healthcare associated infections are also sometimes referred to as HAIs, hospital infections or nosocomial infections. An infection that occurs more than 48 hours after a person is admitted to the hospital is usually considered to be a healthcare associated infection, because the person most likely did not have the infection before being admitted.

Although it's not a problem you may have heard much about, HAIs are one of the biggest public health issues facing society today. Every year, an estimated 1.7 million Americans get a healthcare associated infection, and 99,000 people die as a result of these infections. In Pennsylvania, more than 30,000 people had an HAI in 2006, and patients with healthcare associated infections died at a rate nearly six times that of uninfected patients.

Healthcare associated infections are commonly defined by the area of the body that is affected. The most common types of HAIs are urinary tract infections, gastrointestinal infections, pneumonia, bloodstream infections, and surgical site infections.

HAIs cause pain, suffering, and emotional stress. They further weaken people who are already sick and may lead to the need for additional medication or surgery, an extended hospital stay, and lasting side effects. And healthcare associated infections have a high cost in dollars as well as lives. In Pennsylvania alone, HAIs have been cumulatively estimated to cost more than \$3 billion annually – money that could be spent on improving patient care.

In this section, read more about who is at risk for hospital infections and potential causes.

### **Who Is at Risk?**

Usually when people go into the hospital, they are thinking about getting well – not worrying about getting another illness as a result of their hospital stay. Many people may not even think about healthcare associated infections or know that they are at risk.

The truth is that anyone who is hospitalized for any kind of treatment or surgery can get a hospital infection. Other factors, like your age and health, can also affect your risk level. Because young children, the elderly, and people with already weakened immune systems tend to have a lower resistance to infection, they are at greater risk for getting hospital infections. Poor nutrition and disease history can also lower your resistance to infection.

Your risk for an HAI may also increase depending on why you are hospitalized, and for how long. For example, if you are having surgery, the surgical wound is a common area that can become infected. Having any type of invasive procedure (e.g., a medical procedure in which something is entering the body), like catheters or ventilation tubes, will also increase your risk for hospital infections. People who are hospitalized for a longer period of time will have a greater likelihood of getting an HAI.

## **Causes and Factors**

Like other types of infections, healthcare associated infections can be caused by viruses, bacteria, fungi, or parasites. Healthcare settings are an ideal environment for infections, because these are places where infected persons and persons at increased risk for infection gather together. Other factors increase the risk for the spread of infection, such as crowded conditions within the hospital, frequent transfers of patients from one unit to another, and the concentration of patients at high risk for infection together in the same area. Infections can also be caused by contaminated objects, medical devices, and other materials with which the patient may come into contact.

All hospitalized patients are at risk for HAIs, but some people are at greater risk than others. Children and the elderly are two groups with the highest risk for infection. In addition to age, there are a number of key risk factors that can contribute to the likelihood of getting a hospital infection. These include:

- Failure of healthcare workers to wash their hands between patients and before procedures
- Failure of visitors to wash their hands before and after a hospital visit
- A prolonged hospital stay
- Weakened immune system
- Poor nutrition
- Overuse of antibiotics

There are certain medical procedures that will also increase the risk of infection. In most cases, these are procedures that involve some type of medical device being inserted into the body. Some common procedures that will increase your risk of infection include:

- Catheterization of the bladder
- Surgery and the dressing of surgical wounds
- Respiratory procedures requiring the use of a breathing tube
- Use of intravenous (IV) procedures to deliver nutrition or medication
- Dialysis

## **Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Provider**

It's essential to have free and open communication between you and your healthcare provider. Asking questions will help you know what to expect and what you can do, and help your doctor understand your needs. Below are a number of questions you may consider asking your healthcare provider about healthcare associated infections.

- What kinds of guidelines does the hospital follow to prevent HAIs?
- What are the hospital's policies in regard to hand washing?
- How does the hospital staff ensure that all medical devices are properly cleaned and sterilized before use?
- What will the doctors and nursing staff do to monitor your health during your stay to make sure you haven't developed a hospital infection?
- What signs and symptoms should you look for or be aware of to help identify an HAI?
- If you are having surgery, ask your surgeon about the chance of getting an infection, if it has happened to his or her patients before, and what will be done to make sure you don't get an infection.
- Should you be kept warm during surgery? (For some types of surgery, keeping patients warm can help reduce the risk of infection. Special blankets, hats, and warmed IV liquids can be used to help keep you warm during a surgical procedure.)
- Should you be tested for methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) at least one week before you are admitted into the hospital?

For more information about Healthcare Associated Infections in Pennsylvania and how to prevent them, please visit [www.health.state.pa.us](http://www.health.state.pa.us) or [www.cleanhandssavelives.org](http://www.cleanhandssavelives.org).