

For Our Patients and Their Visitors:

# Help Prevent Infections



Sometimes a patient develops an infection while being treated in the hospital or other medical facility. It could be an infection from germs that enter the body at a surgery site. It could be an infection that develops from germs carried on a piece of medical equipment. There are many possible causes.

**Infections like these are called healthcare-associated infections, or HAIs, and we take them very seriously.**

The good news is that we can prevent many of them, and you can help.

## What are the common signs of healthcare-associated infections (HAIs)?

- Fever
- Nausea
- Unexpected pain, tenderness, redness, or swelling at the surgical site or the place where medical equipment like an IV has been inserted

### Common HAIs include:

- Infections caused by *C. difficile* or Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA)
- Infections that occur at the places where you've had surgery or where a catheter or IV has been inserted into your body
- Lung infections (pneumonia) caused by using a ventilator

HAIs can happen any time you're getting medical care whether it's in a hospital, at a rehab facility, or at home.

If you think you have an HAI, tell your doctors or nurses immediately. Having one or more of these symptoms might not mean you have a healthcare-associated infection, but you want to be sure.

## How are HAIs treated?

If you get one of these infections, your doctor is likely to prescribe an antibiotic. It's important that you take antibiotics exactly as the doctor tells you.

## Here's how you can help prevent HAIs.

### In the hospital:

- Did you see your doctor or nurse clean their hands? If not, ask them to wash their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub (hand sanitizer) before they start working with you.
- Ask your visitors to clean their hands every time they enter your room. And ask them to follow any special instructions from your doctors and nurses.
- Clean your own hands often with soap and water or hand sanitizer, especially after using the bathroom.
- If you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue and discard the tissue right away. Then clean your hands.
- If your treatment involves a medical device like a urinary catheter, ask the doctors and nurses why it's needed and when it will be removed.
- Report any symptoms you have to your doctors or nurses.

## Here's how you can help prevent HAIs.

### At home:

- You'll use many of the same precautions at home that you will in the hospital.
- If your doctor has prescribed antibiotics, take them exactly as your doctor tells you to.
- Keeping your hands clean is important. Clean your own hands often with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rubs (hand sanitizer), especially before touching any medical equipment, before eating, and after using the bathroom.
- Ask your visitors and the people who live with you to keep their hands clean, too. If they're assisting with your care by doing things like changing a dressing, they must wash their hands or use a hand sanitizer every time.
- Understand how to care for any medical device like a catheter you are using at home. Ask questions if you're unsure.
- Keep a list of medical professionals to contact if you have questions or problems. If you have symptoms, contact your doctor or a nurse immediately.
- If you smoke, talk to your doctor about quitting. Patients who smoke get more infections.



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



## Common HAIs: What to Look for/What to Do

### **C. difficile, often called C. diff**

*Clostridium difficile* is a germ that can cause cases of diarrhea ranging from mild to deadly.

In addition to the common signs of an HAI, an infection with *C. diff* can cause the following symptoms:

- Watery diarrhea
- Belly pain and tenderness
- Loss of appetite

#### **If I have C. diff, what can I do?**

Follow the general advice on how to reduce the chance of getting an HAI, but also:

- Ask your doctors and nurses if they should be wearing gowns while they're treating you.
- At home, use your regular laundry detergent and the hottest water temperature recommended to wash your clothes and bed linens.
- Use a separate bathroom or be sure the bathroom is well-cleaned if someone with diarrhea has used it.

### **Central Line-Associated Bloodstream Infection (CLABSI)**

"Central line" refers to the lines used to administer fluids or medications directly to the patient's bloodstream, or to collect blood for medical tests. They're inserted into a major vein close to the heart so they're different from IVs (intravenous injections) that administer fluids to a vein near the skin's surface. Germs can enter the bloodstream from the line itself or its dressing and cause infection.

In addition to the common signs of an HAI, a patient with a CLABSI may have chills.

#### **What can I do to help prevent a CLABSI infection?**

Follow the general advice on how to reduce the chance of getting an HAI, but also:

- Tell your doctor or nurse if the bandage covering where the tube enters your skin comes off, gets wet, or is dirty.
- Ask if you can shower with the lines in place and what precautions you should take while bathing.
- Ask when the tube can be removed and keep asking.
- Ask your doctors and nurses to wash their hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub (hand sanitizer) before handling the lines.

### **Ventilator-Associated Pneumonia (VAP)**

A ventilator is a machine that helps a patient breathe. The ventilator gives the patient oxygen through a tube placed in the nose or mouth, or through a hole in the front of the neck. Patients on a ventilator can develop pneumonia, an infection of the lungs.

#### **What can I do to help prevent pneumonia?**

A patient's loved ones and visitors should follow the general advice on how to reduce the chance of the patient getting an HAI, but also check to see that the precautions to prevent pneumonia are in place. It's ok to ask:

- If the head of the patient's bed should be raised.
- When the patient can try breathing on his/her own.
- When the patient can get out of the bed and start moving around. The sooner a patient is awake and out of bed, the lower the chance they'll develop pneumonia.

### **Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA)**

MRSA is a type of staph bacteria that often enters the body through a break in the skin. Staph is a very common germ that most often causes skin infections. But in some cases, it can cause infection of the lungs (pneumonia), or infections of the blood. If left untreated, MRSA infections can become severe and cause sepsis, which is a life-threatening reaction to severe infection in the body.

In addition to the common signs of an HAI, a patient with MRSA may have a bump or infected area on the skin that's red, swollen, or full of pus or discharge. These bumps are sometimes mistaken for spider bites.

#### **What can I do to reduce the chance of spreading MRSA?**

Follow the general advice on how to reduce the chance of getting an HAI. You can also:

- Ask that your visitors, doctors, and nurses all wash their hands or use hand sanitizer every time they enter your room. Be very careful to wash your own hands as well.
- Tell anyone treating you in the hospital, at home, or at a doctor's office that you have MRSA.

### **Catheter-Associated Urinary Tract Infection (CAUTI)**

This is an infection of the bladder or kidneys caused by a urinary catheter (the thin tube placed in the bladder to drain urine). The longer the catheter is in, the greater the chance you can develop a CAUTI.

In addition to the common signs of an HAI, a CAUTI can cause the following symptoms:

- Burning or other pain in the area below the stomach
- Bloody urine
- Burning while urinating after the catheter is removed
- Increased frequency of urinating after the catheter is removed

#### **What can I do to help prevent a CAUTI infection?**

Follow the general advice on how to reduce the chance of getting an HAI, but also:

- Ask when the catheter can be removed and keep asking.
- Make sure the catheter bag is always below the level of your hips.
- Do not twist, tug, or pull on the catheter tubing.

### **Surgical Site Infection (SSI)**

Most patients who have surgery do well, but a small number will develop an infection in the part of the body operated on. That's called a surgical site infection or SSI.

In addition to the common signs of an HAI, a patient with a surgical site infection may have cloudy fluid drain from their surgical wound.

#### **What can I do to help prevent getting a surgical site infection?**

Follow the general advice on how to reduce the chance of getting an HAI, but also:

- Be sure your doctor knows about all your medical conditions since some health problems like diabetes can affect your surgery and your treatment.
- Before the surgery, don't shave in the area where you'll be having surgery. Shaving can irritate the skin and increase the chance you'll get an infection.
- Ask if your hair will be removed in the area where you're going to have surgery, and if so that it be done with electric clippers and only right before the surgery.
- Ask your doctor if there are bathing instructions you should follow before you have surgery. You may be asked to take a bath or shower using a special antiseptic. Make sure you follow these instructions.
- Ask if you will get antibiotics during your operation to protect against SSI and how long you will be taking the antibiotics.
- Do not let visitors touch your surgical wound or your dressing.
- Let your doctors and nurses know right away if you develop a fever, your wound starts draining, your surgical site is red and swollen, or you develop diarrhea.