

# Monitoring surgical wounds for infection

Information for patients

**This leaflet explains what a surgical wound infection is and our programme for monitoring those infections acquired in hospitals.**

**If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.**

## **What are surgical wound infections?**

Many micro-organisms (germs) live in and on our bodies and also in our environment. Most germs are harmless. Some are useful, for example the germs in our gut (intestines) aid digestion and also help to protect us from harmful germs. Our bodies have natural defences against the organisms that can cause harm. Our skin, for example, normally is a barrier preventing germs from entering our bodies.

A surgical wound infection may occur when germs enter the incision (cut) that the surgeon makes through your skin to do an operation.

## **When do these infections develop?**

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

Although wound infection is a recognised risk of any surgery, surgical wound infections are uncommon.

Some types of surgery will carry a higher risk of infection than others due to the risk from organisms that may be present.

Most surgical wound infections are limited to the skin, but can occasionally spread 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.

## How do we try to prevent wound infections?

**We try to minimise the risk of wound infections by taking the following actions.**

- Ask you to have a shower with soap and water before you come into hospital and also with an antibacterial solution or washcloths before you go for your operation.
- Screen you for carriage of micro-organisms (germs) that are resistant to a lot of antibiotics such as Meticilin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) and Carbapenem - Resistant Organisms (CRO).
- Give you antibiotics just before the operation if they are required for your operation.

## How will my wound be monitored?

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

Our staff are taught to practise hand hygiene (keeping their hands clean to prevent the transmission of infection). You should have received a copy of the leaflet **Helping us to protect you: promoting hand hygiene** which explains more about this. If you think a member of staff may have forgotten to wash their hands before handling your dressing, drain or wound, please remind them. **Staff will not mind being reminded of the importance of cleaning their hands.**

**Infection can develop after you leave hospital. You may have an infection if you develop one of the following symptoms:**

- The skin round your wound gets red or sore or it feels hot and swollen.
- Your wound has a fluid discharge, often green or yellow coloured pus.
- Your wound opens up
- You feel generally unwell or feverish, or you have a temperature.

**If you have a problem with your wound, you should contact your doctor (GP)** as soon as possible, unless you have been told to contact the hospital. This is important as any infection should be treated as soon as possible to prevent it from becoming more serious.

Many patients leave hospital shortly after their operation. Hospital staff need to find out about wound infections that occur after patients leave hospital, not just those that develop when patients are in hospital. This will allow the hospital to get a true picture of the number of patients who get wound infections after surgery.

This information will help us to make any necessary changes to the way we do things if a lot of patients are getting wound infections. For this reason, about one month after your operation the hospital may send you a questionnaire or telephone you to ask if you have had any problems with your wound.

## **What happens if I develop symptoms?**

If the nurse or doctor suspects that you have a surgical wound infection, they may take a sample from the surface of your wound with a swab and send it to the laboratory for tests. Your nurse or doctor may prescribe treatment with antibiotics.

## What information do you pass on?

The hospital may pass information about your operation to the Public Health England (PHE) which co-ordinates the national programme for monitoring surgical site infection. The risk of infection 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.

**No information that can be used to identify you, such as your name, address or postcode, is passed to Public Health England.**

The PHE website [www.phe.org.uk](http://www.phe.org.uk) has a section on surgical wound infections which includes the latest reports on surgical wound infections.

This leaflet is adapted with permission from the PHE leaflet for monitoring surgical wounds for infection.

## Further information

Patient information videos are now available from Guy's & St Thomas' website:

<http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/infection/infection-home.aspx>

## Contact details

### Infection prevention and control team

This is a team of specially trained team of nurses and doctors who advise doctors, nurses and other staff on how to prevent and control the spread of infection.

Please contact them if you have questions or concerns about your surgical wound infection:

**t:** 020 7188 3153, 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit  
[www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)

### Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

### Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

**t:** 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

**t:** 020 7188 3514 (complaints)

**e:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

## **Language and accessible support services**

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

**t:** 020 7188 8815    **e:** [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

## **NHS 111**

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

**t:** 111

**NHS Choices** – Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

**w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

## **Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust**

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, and to become a member:

**t:** 0800 731 0319    **e:** [members@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:members@gstt.nhs.uk)

**w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership)

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