



What You Need to Know about Infections after Surgery: *A Fact Sheet for Patients and Their Family Members*

Most patients who have surgery do well. But sometimes patients get infections. This happens to about 3 out of 100 patients who have surgery. Infections after surgery can lead to other problems. Sometimes, patients have to stay longer in the hospital. Rarely, patients die from infections. Patients and their family members can help lower the risk of infection after surgery. Here are some ways:

Days or weeks before surgery:

Meet with your surgeon.

- Bring an up-to-date list of all the medications you take. Talk with your surgeon about why you take each medication and how it helps.
- Let the surgeon know if you are allergic to any medication and what happens when you take it.
- Tell the surgeon if you have diabetes or high blood sugar.
- Talk about ways to lower your risk of getting an infection. This may include taking antibiotic medicines.

The day or night before surgery:

Take extra good care of your body.

- Do not shave near where you will have surgery. Shaving can irritate your skin which may lead to infection. If you are a man who shaves your face every day, ask your surgeon if it is okay to do so.
- Keep warm. This means wearing warm clothes or wrapping up in blankets when you go to the hospital. In cold weather, it also means heating up the car before you get in. Keeping warm before surgery lowers your chance of getting an infection.

At the time of surgery:

- Tell the anesthesiologist (doctor or nurse who puts you to sleep for surgery) about all the medications you take. A good way to do this is with an up-to-date medication list.
- Let the anesthesiologist know if you have diabetes or high blood sugar. People with high blood sugar have a greater chance of getting infections after surgery.
- Speak up if someone tries to shave you before surgery. Ask why you need to be shaved and talk with your surgeon if you have any concerns.
- Ask for blankets or other ways to stay warm while you wait for surgery. Find out how you will be kept warm during and after surgery. Ask for extra blankets if you feel cold.
- Ask if you will get antibiotic medicine. If so, find out how much medicine you will get. Most people are on antibiotics for just one day as taking too much can lead to other problems.

You can learn more about Surgical Site Infection as it relates to the 5 Million Lives Campaign at www.ihi.org.

The 5 Million Lives Campaign is an initiative to protect patients from five million incidents of medical harm over the next two years (December 2006 – December 2008).

<http://www.ihi.org/IHI/Programs/Campaign/Campaign.htm>

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