



Department of Infection Control and Prevention

Monitoring Surgical Wounds for Infection

Information for parents and carers

Introduction

This leaflet explains surgical wound infection and our programme for monitoring infections acquired in hospitals. If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for your child.

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 (stomach) produce useful chemicals, and also help to protect us from harmful germs. Our bodies have natural defences against the few organisms that can cause harm. For example our skin prevents germs from entering our bodies.

A surgical wound infection occurs when germs enter the incision (cut) that the surgeon makes through 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 healed (up to several weeks after the operation). Very occasionally (1) an infection can occur several months after an operation.

Surgical wound infections are uncommon. 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 will my child's wound be monitored?

During your child's stay in hospital, the nurse who changes their dressing will check for any signs of infection. If you are concerned about your child's wound, tell the nurse who is looking after your child.

Don't be tempted to remove your child's dressing, or touch the wound or wound drain. You could accidentally transfer germs from your fingers to your child's wound.

You should expect some redness around the surgical wound as the healing process takes place.

What happens if my child develops symptoms?

If the nurse or doctor suspects your child has a surgical wound infection, they may take a sample from the surface of the wound with a swab and send it to the laboratory for tests. Your child's nurse or doctor may prescribe treatment with antibiotics. The laboratory test will help confirm that the antibiotic prescribed was the right choice.

A wound infection can develop after your child has left hospital.

Your child may have an infection if they develop one of the following symptoms:

- The skin around their wound increasingly gets red or sore or it feels hot and swollen.
- The wound has a green or yellow coloured discharge (pus).
- Your child feels generally unwell or feverish, or has a temperature.

If you have a problem with your child's wound

You should contact your general practitioner (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.

About one month after your child's operation the hospital may send you a questionnaire or telephone you to ask if you have had any problems with the wound. This is because hospital staff need to find out about wound infections that occur after patients leave hospital, not just those that develop in hospital. The information you provide will help the hospital to get a true picture of the number of patients who get wound infections after surgery. This information will enable us to make any changes needed if a lot of patients are getting wound infections.

Currently patients who have undergone brain, heart and orthopaedic surgery are followed up with a telephone call.

What information do you pass on?

The hospital may pass information about your child's operation to Public Health England which co-ordinates the national programme for monitoring "wound infection". To do this they require a lot of information including

- Your child's age and sex
- Your child's general medical condition before the operation
- Type of operation
- How long the operation lasted.

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

Useful sources of information

⁽¹⁾ The PHE website (www.phe.org.uk) has a section on surgical wound infections which includes the latest report on surgical wound infections.

This fact sheet only gives general information. You must always discuss the individual treatment of your child with the appropriate member of staff. Do not rely on this leaflet alone for information about your child's treatment. This information can be made available in other languages and formats if requested. This leaflet is adapted with permission from the PHE leaflet for monitoring surgical wounds for infection

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