

Information for patients

Preventing surgical site infection



Infection Prevention and Control

What is a surgical site infection?

Many tiny organisms, including bacteria and viruses live on our skin, in our bodies, and around us without causing us any harm. When you have surgery, some of these organisms can get into the wound and cause a surgical site infection. Some surgical site infections can be easily treated, but others can be very serious if they affect the deeper tissues and artificial implants under the skin. This can lead to further hospital admissions and further surgery which can severely affect your quality of life.

When do surgical site infections develop?

A surgical site infection can develop any time after your operation. Most occur within 2–3 weeks after surgery. Sometimes a deeper infection can develop several months or years after surgery, when an artificial implant such as a knee or hip replacement or any metalwork has been inserted.

What increases the risk of a surgical site infection?

You are more likely to develop a surgical site infection if you are or have any of the following:

- **Diabetes.** It is important that your blood sugar is well controlled as high blood sugar can slow down the healing process.
- **Smoking.** If you smoke, it is important that you try to give up at least 4 weeks before your surgery. Smoking before and after surgery reduces the amount of oxygen that gets to your tissues, which slows down healing and increases your risk of a surgical site infection. Ask your GP or Practice Nurse for advice and support on giving up smoking.
- **Poor diet.** Your body needs the right nutrients to heal quickly. It is important that you eat a healthy balanced diet and be well hydrated by drinking plenty of water before and after your surgery.
- **Overweight.** Being overweight is a significant risk for developing a surgical site infection and also increases the forces on your joints. It is useful to lose excess weight prior to your surgery by eating a healthy balanced diet and taking more exercise.
- **Meticillin resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA)** is a cause of surgical site infection. You will have a nasal swab at preoperative assessment to ensure that you do not have MRSA. If MRSA is detected at preoperative assessment, you will be informed, and the necessary treatment will be arranged prior to your surgery.
- **Meticillin sensitive Staphylococcus aureus (MSSA)** is a bacteria that commonly lives on our bodies and can cause a surgical site infection. To reduce infections caused by this bacteria, you may be given an antibiotic cream to apply to both your nostrils and an antiseptic body and hair wash to use for 5 days prior to surgery, including the day of your surgery, or as otherwise directed.

What else can be done to reduce the risk of a surgical site infection?

- **Shaving.** DO NOT shave the skin around the area of your surgery prior to admission as shaving is known to increase the risk of surgical site infection. If hair needs to be removed, the operating theatre staff will use electric clippers with a disposable head.

- **Shower or bath** using an antiseptic wash for 5 days before your surgery including day of surgery to make sure that your skin and hair is clean. An antiseptic body and hair wash will be given to you when you attend pre-operative assessment.
- **Keeping warm** reduces the risk of surgical site infection. During cold weather make sure that you are warm on arrival for your surgery. Hospital staff will take measures to keep you warm during your surgery and your hospital stay but please ask for extra blankets if you feel you are cooling down.
- **Skin cleaning** will be done with an antiseptic solution in the operating theatre before the incision is made.
- **Antibiotics** may be given as per National Guidelines, during and after your surgery, to help reduce the risk of developing an infection.
- **Dressings** specially designed to promote the healing process will be applied to your surgical site. This dressing will usually stay in place until your sutures or clips are to be removed at your GP practice at approximately 2 weeks after surgery. If the dressing needs to be replaced sooner, prior to you leaving hospital, the nursing staff will do this by using a technique that minimises the risk of contamination. The nursing staff will advise you about how to care for your dressing and surgical site after leaving hospital.
- **Hand Hygiene.** Wash your hands with soap and water or clean your hands with an alcohol-based gel before eating food. Wash your hands after visiting the toilet or using a commode or urinal. Do not touch your dressing or surgical site. Visitors must not touch your dressing. Speak up if you see that a health care worker has not washed or cleaned their hands.

What should you do if you suspect you have a surgical site infection when at home?

Contact the hospital ward at any time, or you may contact your Surgeon's secretary during office hours. Arrangements can be made for you to attend our hospital outpatient department so that your surgical site can be assessed.

When should you contact the hospital ward or Surgeon's secretary?

- Pain around the surgical site that gets worse
- Skin around the surgical site becomes red or swollen
- Bleeding or oozing from surgical site
- Temperature goes up and you feel unwell with shivers or sweats

Any of the above could be a sign that you have a surgical site infection.

In order to monitor and record surgical site infections, we will be introducing surgical site surveillance for selected categories of surgery. You may receive a questionnaire by post to be completed 4 weeks after your surgery.

If you require a special edition of this leaflet

This leaflet is available in large print. Arrangements can also be made on request for it to be explained in your preferred language. Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) email: rjah.pals.office@nhs.net

Feedback

Tell us what you think of our patient information leaflet. Please send your comments to the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) email: rjah.pals.office@nhs.net

Date of publication: April 2026

Date of review: April 2029

Created by: Infection Prevention and Control Team

© RJAH Trust 2026

The Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt
Orthopaedic Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
Oswestry, Shropshire SY10 7AG

Tel: 01691 404000

Web: www.rjah.nhs.uk