

Surgical Wounds

Caring for Your Wound and Preventing Infection after Surgery

PATIENT INFORMATION

WHAT IS A SURGICAL WOUND?

A surgical wound is the incision made by your surgeon during an operation.

You can help take care of your surgical wound by following the instructions of your surgeon and/or nurse.

What can you and your family / whānau do to prevent surgical site infections?

Before your operation

- Tell your doctor about other health problems you might have such as diabetes, kidney disease, and/or skin conditions - these could affect your surgery and your treatment.
- If you smoke, talk to your doctor or ask to be referred to your local smoking cessation programme for support to stop smoking before your surgery. Patients who smoke are more likely to get infections.
- Don't shave anywhere near the area where you are having surgery.
- Tell your doctor if you have any skin lesions or scratches near the area where you are having surgery.

After your operation

- If you think a doctor, nurse or other healthcare worker may have forgotten to clean their hands before attending to your needs it is OK for you or your family / whānau to remind them.

What is a surgical site infection?

A surgical site infection (SSI) is an infection of the surgical wound. Some SSIs only involve the skin but others are more serious and can involve the tissues under the skin, organs or implanted material such as joint replacements.

Infection can be a serious complication of surgery so it is important to recognise the signs and symptoms.

Infection can delay healing and lead to the need for further treatment or hospitalisation.

Symptoms of a surgical site infection

- Increased pain
- Swelling in the area of the wound
- Increased redness or warmth of the skin around the wound
- Discharge from the wound that is yellow, green or brown. This may also smell unpleasant
- You feel unwell or have a temperature

If you notice any of the above signs and symptoms, contact your surgeon for advice, or your GP if your surgeon is unavailable. You may require a swab to be taken prior to you being commenced on antibiotics.

If you are diagnosed with an infection following your surgery please notify a specialist at the hospital or ask your Healthcare Provider to do so.

Can surgical site infections be treated?

Yes—Most SSIs can be treated with antibiotics. Sometimes patients with SSIs also need more surgery to treat the infection.

What are hospitals doing to prevent SSIs?

To prevent SSIs, doctors, nurses and other healthcare staff:

- Clean their hands and arms up to their elbows with antiseptic just before the operation
- Wear hair covers, masks, gowns and gloves during the operation to keep the surgery area clean
- Remove your hair around the operation site using electric clippers. Razors are not used as these can irritate the skin making it easier to develop an infection.
- Clean your skin at the operation site with an antiseptic that kills bacteria (germs)
- Always clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol based hand rub before and after caring for you and other patients

Caring for your wound.

Self care includes:

- Keeping the wound clean and dry.
- Changing the dressing if instructed to by the Surgeon or Nurse.
- Regular handwashing before and after touching your wound.
- Avoiding trauma, pressure or friction to the wound.
- Stopping smoking.
- Recognising signs and symptoms of infection and seeking advice promptly when required.
- If your wound bleeds, press **firmly** and **continuously** with a clean cloth for 10–20 minutes. When bleeding stops seek advice from your surgeon or GP.

If bleeding is excessive or persistent seek medical advice immediately. Keep pressure on the wound.

Prevent infection with regular hand hygiene.

Always wash your hands before and after touching your dressing or caring for your wound.

1. Turn on tap and wet hands
2. Add soap
3. Wash hands for 20 seconds
4. Rinse
5. Dry
6. Turn off tap

You have to wash your hands for at least 20 seconds to get rid of bacteria (germs).

Other important information

- Follow the instructions you were given on discharge. We will tell you if and when you need to change the dressing, when you can shower and when or if you need to have staples/sutures removed.
- If your wound bleeds or you have a dressing that is no longer sealed, change the dressing as instructed if you have been given advice to do so, otherwise seek advice from your Surgeon or GP.
- Unless instructed to do so, do not put ointments, creams or lotions on your wound. Do not use soap, talcum powder or shower gel directly over your healing wound.
- Only use clean cloths or towels on the wound and pat dry gently. (Do not use the same towel on the rest of your body)
- Do not wear restrictive or tight clothing over your wound
- Change into fresh clean clothes every day
- Keep bed linen fresh
- Wash hands after touching animals. Do not allow pets to sit or sleep next to you until your wound is healed.
- Extra care is required for a few days after removal of sutures or staples as the wound will still be weak. Avoid stretching or knocking it.
- Do not undertake too much activity or dirty work/sport/play until the wound is healed.
- Showering is preferable to bathing. Do not rub or soak the healing wound when in the shower, a light splash with water is allowable.
- DO NOT leave a wet dressing on your wound.

Before you go home

Ask your doctor or nurse to explain everything you need to know about caring for your wound.

Make sure you have the name and contact details of the health provider or hospital to call if you develop signs or symptoms of an infection.

For more information contact your specialist or GP.