

Consumer information

Healthcare associated infection prevention

What are healthcare associated infections?

Healthcare associated infections (HAI) are complications that can occur as a result of medical treatment and are caused by micro-organisms such as bacteria and viruses. Some of these micro-organisms can be found in the environment, and some live normally within the body. The types of HAI that are most commonly seen include those associated with a surgical wound or the insertion of medical devices such as an intravenous drip, urinary catheter or wound drain.

They can happen when you are receiving care in any healthcare facility such as hospitals, at home, at your GP surgery, or in nursing homes.

How do they happen?

Infections may occur after an invasive procedure such as surgery or insertion of a medical device. These procedures bypass the body's normal protective layer, the skin. Some patients are at greater risk than others of developing an infection whilst in hospital, because they are seriously unwell with diseases that affect their body's ability to fight infection, such as those suffering burns or receiving chemotherapy for cancer.

Can they be prevented?

Healthcare workers use various well-established procedures to help prevent infections, the most important of which are:

- > taking special precautions to prevent infection during surgery, wound care and insertion and care of medical devices.
- > washing hands with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand rub before attending to patients
- > wearing protective equipment such as gloves, gowns, masks and eye shields when appropriate
- > cleaning and disinfecting or sterilising medical equipment between patient use
- > separating infectious patients from others, usually in a single room
- > maintaining a clean patient environment

What can I do?

Everyone, including healthcare workers, patients and visitors, have a role in preventing and controlling HAI.

There are several things you can do to help prevent the occurrence of an infection whilst in hospital or receiving care in other healthcare facilities, such as:

Before admission

- > When being admitted to a hospital or other healthcare facility report any infections you have had recently, especially if you are still on antibiotics.
- > Stop smoking before any surgery as smoking increases the risk of infection.

During admission

- > Always wash your hands after using the toilet or a commode.
- > Wash or clean your hands before eating.
- > It's ok to ask a healthcare worker if they have cleaned their hands.
- > Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze (or cough into your elbow) and clean your hands afterwards.
- > Avoid touching a wound or medical device (for example, drips or drainage tubes). Ensure the tubing or bags are not sitting on the floor
- > Keep the skin around any dressings clean and dry. Let the healthcare worker looking after you know promptly if it becomes loose or wet.
- > Tell your nurse if the area around any of the lines or tubes inserted into your body, or your wound becomes red, swollen or painful.

On discharge

- > Make sure you take the full course of antibiotics you are prescribed, even if you are feeling better.
- > Follow instructions you are given on looking after wounds or any medical devices you may have.
- > If your infection does not clear up visit your doctor in the first instance.

For visitors or carers

You can help to prevent the spread of infection by:

- > not visiting someone in hospital or at home if you feel unwell. Wait until you are fully recovered
- > cleaning your hands before visiting friends/relatives in hospital and before you leave
- > not touching dressings, drips or other medical equipment connected to the patient
- > alerting staff if you notice tubing is disconnected, or dangling on the floor.

For further information

- > Speak to the doctor or nurse looking after you
- > Contact your hospital Infection Prevention and Control Unit Team
- > Contact Infection Control Service at HealthICS@sa.gov.au.

For more information

Infection Control Service
Communicable Disease Control Branch
Department for Health and Ageing
Telephone: 7425-7161
www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/hospitalinfections

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*SA Health Safety and Quality Community Advisory Group.



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