Intermountain® Healthcare

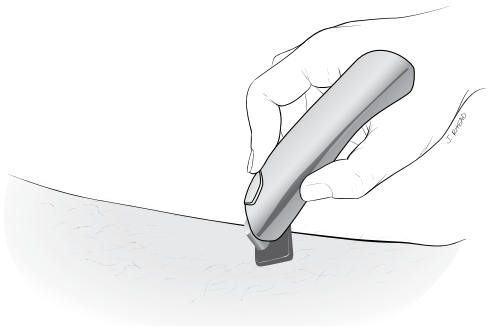
Surgical Site Infections

What is a Surgical Site Infection?

A surgical site infection is an infection that occurs after surgery in the part of the body where the surgery took place. Most patients who have surgery do not develop an infection. However, infections develop in about 1 to 3 out of every 100 patients who have surgery.

Some common symptoms of a surgical site infection are:

- Redness and pain at the area where you had surgery
- Drainage of cloudy fluid from your surgical wound
- Fever



Hair may be removed from the area where your surgery will occur. If so, it will be removed with electric clippers, not with a razor.

Can surgical site infections be treated?

Yes. Most surgical site infections can be treated with antibiotics. Which antibiotic is used depends on the bacteria (germs) causing the infection. Sometimes patients with surgical site infections also need another surgery to treat the infection.

Preventing surgical site infections

You and your healthcare providers need to work together to prevent surgical site infections. Below are things your healthcare providers will do to prevent infection. Following that is a list things YOU can do.

YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS will do these things to prevent surgical site infections:

- **Clean their hands and arms** with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub before and after caring for each patient.
- (Possibly) **remove some of your hair** if it's in the same area where the surgery will occur. They should use electric clippers and NOT shave you with a razor.
- **Wear special hair covers, masks, gowns, and gloves** during surgery to keep the surgery area clean.
- (Possibly) **give you antibiotics before your surgery starts.** In many cases, the antibiotics will be started within 60 minutes before the surgery starts and stopped within 24 hours after surgery.
- **Clean your skin** at the site of the surgery with a special soap that kills germs.

YOU can do these things to prevent surgical site infections:

Before your surgery:

- **Tell your doctor about other medical problems you have.** Health problems such as allergies, diabetes, and obesity could affect your surgery and your treatment.
- **Quit smoking.** Patients who smoke get more infections. Talk to your doctor about how you can quit before your surgery.
- **Do not shave** near where you will have surgery. Shaving with a razor can irritate your skin and make it easier to develop an infection.

At the time of surgery:

- **Speak up if someone tries to shave you with a razor** before surgery. Ask why you need to be shaved, and talk with your surgeon if you have any concerns.
- **Ask if you will get antibiotics** before surgery.

After your surgery:

- **Make sure your healthcare providers clean their hands** before examining you, either with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub. If you don't see them wash their hands, please aks them to do so.
- **Don't let family and friends who visit you touch the surgical wound** or dressings.
- **Ask people who visit you to clean their hands** with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub before and after visiting you. If you don't see them clean their hands, ask them to.
- **If you have questions, ask your healthcare providers.**

The information in this fact sheet is cosponsored by:

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