



Preventing an Infection after Surgery

After your surgery, one of the most important things you can do is prevent an infection in your incision. An infection can slow your healing process, make you feel pretty lousy, and can, in some cases, create some serious complications .

There are many small things that you can do that will greatly improve your chances of recovering from surgery without an infection.

1. Wash Your Hands

The most important thing you can do is wash your hands frequently and properly. By properly, this means a good hand washing like hospital staff members do, using soap, lukewarm water and washing for at least 30 seconds. (Tip: if you sing "Happy Birthday" while you wash your hands, they will be clean when you finish the song). Antibacterial soap is ideal, but it isn't absolutely necessary, any soap will do.

Hand washing is the front line of defense against infection. It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to keep your hands clean. This is also true of anyone who may be helping you care for your incision after surgery, even if they wear gloves.

2. Take Your Antibiotics as Prescribed

Antibiotics may prevent an infection, so be sure to take them as prescribed . You may be tempted to quit taking them if they upset your stomach, or if you feel great, but finishing the entire prescription is essential to staying infection free. If you stop taking your antibiotic too soon, you may be at risk for developing a strain of infection that is resistant to that antibiotic.

3. Keep the Wound Clean and Dry

It is important to keep your wound clean to prevent infection. The best way to keep your wound clean, if your surgeon permits, is to shower and clean the wound with a mild antibacterial soap. Be sure to rinse the soap off well, as it can be irritating to our healing skin. Allow your incision to dry completely before applying a clean and dry bandage . You may not need to cover your incision, only do so if your surgeon has recommended .

4. Wash Your Hands Before and After Doing any Wound Care

If you are caring for your wound , it is important that you wash your hands before you touch the incision or care for it. In fact, for patients recovering in the hospital, it is normal for nurses to wash their hands and put on gloves before touching the incision and removing the bandage, then applying new, clean gloves before applying a clean dressing.

5. Stop Smoking Now

Many smokers are sick of being told to quit smoking, and most are also fully aware that smoking is bad for their health. In this case, there is a very good reason that has nothing to do with the possibility of cancer in the future . Smokers are much more likely to have an infection during their recovery from surgery, in fact, some studies have shown that a smoker may be up to six times more likely to end up with an infection than a non-smoker. In addition, smokers also have more scarring and heal more slowly. The more slowly your incision closes, the longer you are at risk for an infection in that area.

6. If You Leave the House, Use an Antibacterial Hand Cleanser

It may seem like hand washing has been covered pretty well already, but when you are out in public it is important to remember that everyone else isn't as diligent as you are. Everything you touch in public has the potential to spread an infection, so use waterless hand sanitizer frequently. Basically, assume that everyone else has failed to wash their hands and you are protecting yourself from their germs.

7. Resist the Ointment Urge

It may be tempting to use ointments and lotions on your incision, but it is not a good idea to use anything on your incision that your physician has not recommended. Many antibacterial ointments will actually keep moisture on your skin and in your incision , which creates an environment that encourages the growth of germs.

Sources:

Preventing Infection. New York City Health and Hospitals. 2008

<http://www.nycgov/html/hhc/irfocus/html/preventinginfections/preventinginfections.html>