

September 2021

## What is a surgical site infection?

A surgical site infection, or SSI, is an infection that a person may acquire after having surgery. The infection occurs in the part of the body where the surgery was performed. SSIs can be superficial infections, involving the skin only, or can be more serious and involve tissues under the skin, organs or implanted material.

## How can SSIs occur?

The germs that can cause SSIs can be spread in various ways. They can be carried on the hands of healthcare workers or visitors and then transferred to the patient during treatment. Germs might also be present on surgical equipment or supplies that have not been cleaned properly. Other germs might be naturally present on the skin or inside certain areas of the body (such as the bowel) and can cause an infection if introduced into the rest of the body.

## Who is at risk for an SSI?

Any person having surgery can be at risk for getting an SSI. Patients that are more at risk include the elderly, obese individuals and individuals with a weakened immune system. In addition, people who smoke are more risk for developing these infections. Shaving near the surgical site can irritate the skin and make it easier to develop an infection.

## What are the symptoms of SSIs?

SSIs can cause a wide range of symptoms including pain, heat, redness, swelling and drainage from the surgical wound. The patient may also develop a fever.

### ***Fast Facts***

- SSIs are infections acquired after surgery.
- SSIs are caused by bacteria from a variety of sources.
- Anybody who has had surgery is at risk.
- Symptoms include pain, redness and swelling.
- Best prevented through proper hygiene
- Diagnosed through your healthcare provider
- Treatment depends on the severity of infection

## How are SSIs prevented?

One of the best ways to prevent SSIs is with proper hand hygiene. Your healthcare provider should always wash their hands with soap and water and use an antiseptic agent before performing surgery. They should also use a mask, gloves, gown and cap. When preparing a patient for surgery, patients are often given antibiotics shortly before the surgery and the hair on the area of the skin where the incision will be made is removed with electric clippers. Razors should not be used. The skin should also be properly cleaned with an antiseptic solution.

**Antibiotics should be stopped within**

**24 hours**  
of surgery.

Anyone that tends to the surgical site after surgery should wash their hands or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, as well as wear gloves. The surgical site should remain clean and dry and bandages should be changed if they become soiled. Antibiotics should be stopped within 24 hours after surgery. Patients should also refrain from smoking, as that increases the risk of infection.

## How do I know if I have an SSI?

Your healthcare provider will determine whether or not you have an infection. Sometimes they are able to determine this by visually examining the surgical site and other times they may need to take a blood sample or a skin swab for testing.

## How can SSIs be treated?

Treatment for SSIs depends on the severity of the infection as well as the type of bacteria that caused the infection. Many SSIs can be treated with antibiotics, but some require additional surgeries to treat the infection.

## Outside Resources on SSIs

All information presented is intended for public use.

For more information about surgical site infections, please refer to:

<http://www.cdc.gov/HAI/ssi/ssi.html>

<http://www.cdc.gov/hai/>

For additional information on SSIs:  
<http://bit.ly/IDOHSSI>

