

Infection Prevention and You



What are healthcare-associated infections?

Healthcare-associated infections (HAIs) are infections that patients can get in a healthcare facility while receiving medical care. These infections are often preventable. No matter where you are—a hospital, a long-term care facility, outpatient surgery center, dialysis center, doctor's office—you are at risk for infections. In order to develop an infection while receiving these services, bacteria must somehow enter your body. This can happen through a wound, a device such as a catheter, or even by way of the lungs. Germs often spread from unclean surfaces to the hands of healthcare workers, patients, or visitors.

The most common infections associated with healthcare facilities include catheter-associated urinary tract infections; central line-associated bloodstream infections, surgical site infections, and pneumonia. *Clostridium difficile* infection (also known as deadly diarrhea) is another harmful illness that can develop from antibiotic use.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 25 hospitalized patients will get an infection as a result of the care they receive. An estimated 75,000 patients will die each year. Because HAIs are a threat to patient safety, many hospitals and healthcare facilities have made the prevention and reduction of these infections a top priority. These resources and interventions have led to an increased focus in prevention efforts, as well as improvements in clinical practice and medical procedures.

It is very likely that you or your family member will be a patient in a healthcare facility at some point in your lives. These infections can have serious consequences including emotional stress, financial and/or medical costs, prolonged hospital stay, and even death. Fortunately, there are many things you can do to decrease your risk of developing an HAI, and keep you and your loved ones safe!

How to help prevent an HAI:

- 1) Speak up for your care.** Always talk with your healthcare providers, ask questions, and discuss your concerns. Whenever a treatment is recommended, ask why it is necessary and what risks are associated with it. If you need a catheter, ask every day when it can be removed. Write questions down before your appointment, so that you don't forget anything!
- 2) Clean your hands often.** Hand hygiene is the best way to prevent the spread of infection. Make sure that everyone around you, including your healthcare providers and visitors, clean their hands. If you don't see that person washing their hands or using an alcohol based hand-rub, don't feel bad about asking them to do so. Healthcare workers have been educated about hand hygiene and also expect

Infection Prevention and You

that patients will—and should—ask them about hand washing. It is important that you are also diligent about washing your own hands when you are caring for yourself or a family member.

- 3) **Get smart about antibiotics.** Ask your provider if antibiotics are necessary and make sure to ask if it is the appropriate antibiotic. Also, don't expect to receive antibiotics for every illness, as antibiotics can only treat a bacterial infection. Diarrhea can accompany antibiotic usage, and it is important that you report frequent episodes of diarrhea to your healthcare provider.
- 4) **Recognize an infection.** Some signs and symptoms of an infection include redness, pain, and drainage at the incision site or at the site of the catheter or drainage tube. Many times these symptoms are accompanied by fever. Always contact your healthcare provider for additional guidance.
- 5) **Protect yourself with vaccinations.** Remember to get your annual flu vaccine and other vaccines as recommended by your healthcare provider in an effort to prevent illness and avoid complications associated with vaccine-preventable illnesses.

Each of us—patients, families, and healthcare personnel—has an important role to play in keeping patients safe from infection. Learning about the most common HAIs will help patients and their families stay healthy while receiving healthcare.

Additional resources

- The CDC—Patient Safety: What You Can Do to Be a Safe Patient <https://www.cdc.gov/hai/patientsafety/patient-safety.html>
- The WHO—The burden of health care-associated infection worldwide http://www.who.int/gpsc/country_work/burden_hcai/en/
- Healthy People—Healthcare-Associated Infections <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/healthcare-associated-infections>
- APIC—Infection Prevention and You <http://professionals.site.apic.org/>
- APIC—Infection Prevention Basics <http://professionals.site.apic.org/infection-prevention-basics/>
- APIC Consumer Alert—What is an HAI <https://apic.org/For-Consumers/Monthly-alerts-for-consumers/Article?id=what-is-an-hai>

Updated: 1/30/2018