

“Ten Things Patients Should Know” Series

RECOGNIZE AND PREVENT SURGICAL SITE INFECTIONS

1. **KNOW THE RISK FACTORS:** Examples include diabetes, nicotine use, chronic steroid use, obesity, malnutrition, and prolonged pre-operative hospitalization.
2. **PRE-OPERATIVE SKIN CLEANSING:** Inquire about using a pre-surgical chlorhexidine gluconate body wash. Patients can bathe with an anti-microbial body wash before surgery to lower the bacterial count on the skin.
3. **SCREENING FOR MRSA:** Ask if the patient should be screened with a simple nasal swab to see if they carry MRSA bacteria. If the test is positive, patients may need to be "decolonized" with chlorhexidine baths and topical mupirocin ointment applied to the nasal area.
4. **ANTIBIOTICS:** If antibiotic pre-medication (prophylaxis) is needed before surgery there are three critical factors. Patients must receive the correct antibiotic, the antibiotic is given within 60 minutes of the first incision and antibiotics are usually discontinued within 24 hours.
5. **HAIR REMOVAL:** Any hair should be clipped, not shaved. Shaving the site within 24 hours of the surgery may increase risk of infection because a razor can cause small cuts that allow bacteria to penetrate the skin.
6. **BODY TEMPERATURE AFTER SURGERY:** Keeping the patient warm after surgery may be associated with a lower rate of infection. Check to see if the patient is shivering and touch the hands and feet to be sure they do not feel cold.
7. **BLOOD GLUCOSE LEVELS:** If the patient is a diabetic, know that there may be a relationship between elevated glucose levels and an increase in surgical site infections, especially in the first 48 hours after surgery.
8. **OXYGEN:** Administering oxygen after surgery may help reduce the chances of infection. Ask the staff if the patient needs oxygen.
9. **HANDWASHING AND STERILE GLOVE USE:** The staff needs to wash their hands *and* wear sterile gloves when checking wounds or touching dressings. Patients who change dressings at home should wash their hands and wear gloves.
10. **PATIENT EDUCATION:** Information is needed to allow patients to watch for the signs of surgical site infection including fever, excessive wound pain, redness, and swelling.