



How to Prevent Health Care Associated Infections

Expert
Reviewed

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It's a cruel irony that such a significant number of people who go to American hospitals and clinics and health care facilities in other countries end up with a very serious bacterial or viral infection. More specifically, about one in every 25 hospital patients have at least one healthcare-associated infection (HAI).^[1] These infections afflict about 1.7 million U.S. patients yearly, and each year at least 99,000 of them die.^[2] The vast majority of these infections can be prevented by increasing your own awareness and sanitary habits while in a hospital and getting sanitation policies improved within health care facilities.

Part
1

Taking Matters into Your Own Hands

1 Disinfect your hands frequently. One of the most important steps to take for reducing the risk of getting an infection while staying in a hospital or clinical setting is [washing your hands](#) properly — at least with soap and water, but preferably also with alcohol-based gels or wipes.^[3] Washing your hands is not only important after going to the bathroom, but also, after you touch any other surface or person outside the bathroom. Surfaces to be particularly careful of are doorknobs, light switches, bedside railings, curtains, bedside tables and medical equipment and paraphernalia.

- Consider using the paper towel you used to dry your hands with in the bathroom as a barrier over doorknobs and bedside rails. Once you're back in bed, throw the paper towel in a nearby garbage bin.
- Make sure there is a dispenser of alcohol-based hand sanitizer within reach of your bed. Once you return to bed from the bathroom, sanitize your hands again.

2 Don't touch other patients. Touching other patients, even for compassionate reasons, isn't a good idea in hospitals or other long-term care facilities. They may be harboring antibiotic-resistant bacteria or super pathogenic viruses on their skin or clothing that can infect you and make you very ill. Conversely, you may transfer similar pathogenic microorganisms to them and put their lives at stake. Talking and listening to other patients is fine and often passes the time faster, but never contact other patient's wounds or bandages and don't shake their hands. Also, avoid sharing towels, washcloths, razors or clothes

- If you or any surrounding patients are coughing repeatedly, then consider wearing a surgical mask when in close proximity. Viruses and bacteria travel and become airborne within droplets of saliva and mucus.
- Common HAIs include *Clostridium difficile* (*C. diff*), MRSA, *Acinetobacter*, Carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae (CRE), hepatitis, *Klebsiella* norovirus, and more.^[4]
- MRSA stands for methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria because they are resistant to several common antibiotics.^[5] MRSA bacteria developed in hospitals decades ago due to overuse of antibiotics. Now, there are only a few powerful drugs that can contain MRSA bacteria.

3 Don't touch medical equipment or machines. It should go without saying that you shouldn't touch medical equipment because you may disrupt the function or change the settings (which can put your life at risk), but medical devices and paraphernalia are also commonly contaminated with pathogenic microorganisms. In fact, some of the most deadly vectors of infection can survive for weeks on medical equipment and in patient rooms.^[6] As such, keep your hands to yourself and your curiosity in check by not touching any medical devices, intravenous paraphernalia or nearby diagnostic equipment.

- Each year more than 18,000 American patients die from MRSA infections that they contract while in hospitals.^[7]
- In addition to bacteria, serious viruses to be concerned about in a hospital setting include MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome) and SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome).^{[8][9]}

4 Keep your hands away from your eyes and mouth. Even if you're diligent about washing and sanitizing your hands while in the hospital, it's a good idea to break the habit of touching your face, particularly your mouth and eyes. Bacteria and viruses on your hands are unlikely to lead to infections there (unless you have cuts or abrasions), but your eyes and mouth are entry points into your body where pathogenic microorganisms can take advantage and multiply if the conditions are right. If they can penetrate the mucous membranes of the eyes and mouth, they can also gain access to the bloodstream and infect other parts of the body.

- If you don't already wear glasses, consider wearing clear plastic eye protection to prevent yourself from touching or rubbing your eyes.
- Women need to take special precaution against transmitting germs while applying their eye makeup and lipstick. Within a hospital setting, it's safer to go without makeup.^[10]
- When using alcohol-based hand rubs and sanitizers, products with at least 60% alcohol content are preferred.^[11]

5 Try to eat nutritiously and drink lots of purified water. Always remember that your immune system is designed to fight off pathogenic microorganisms such as bacteria and viruses, so that is ultimately your best ally in preventing hospital infections. The main problem is that most people who enter a hospital or clinic are sick and have compromised or weakened immunity, which makes them particularly susceptible to infections. As such, make sure to eat lots of fresh produce and keep well hydrated. Fruits and veggies are loaded with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and other compounds that can kill bacteria and viruses.^[12] Drinking lots of water keeps your blood volume up and mucous membranes moist, making it difficult for pathogens to penetrate inside your body.

- Preparing fresh fruit smoothies before you head into the hospital for a procedure is a good idea, or have your family bring them to you on a regular basis. Snacking on raw veggies (broccoli, tomatoes, cucumbers) is another great way of getting important nutrients into your body.
- Your immune system will benefit by avoiding refined sugars while in the hospital (soda pop, candy, ice cream, desserts, most baked goods).
- Supplements that can boost immunity include vitamins A, C and D, zinc, selenium, echinacea, olive leaf extract and astragalus root.^[13] Remember not to take supplements of any kind without consulting a doctor first. They may interact with medications or medical conditions.

Part 2

Making Recommendations to Health Care Staff

1 Ask for daily bathing with antiseptic agents. Research suggests that bathing hospital patients daily with a mild antibacterial soap can reduce skin and bloodstream infections dramatically.^[14] Hospital nurses and support staff are typically very busy and probably don't enjoy constantly cleaning ill patients, but ask or remind them politely to help you with such tasks on a daily basis. This is particularly important if you're unable to get to the bathroom to urinate or defecate. Changing adult diapers is not enough by itself — it should be followed by daily baths.

- The antiseptic soap of choice is chlorhexidine gluconate, and it comes in several forms, including bars and wipes. It's available over the counter, so consider buying a few bars if you anticipate a longer hospital stay.
- Some medical experts believe it's helpful for surgery patients to shower with chlorhexidine soap both the night before and morning of their surgery.^[15]

2 Ask all staff to sanitize their hands before touching you. Don't make the assumption that all hospital staff are equally trained or conscientious about preventing the spread of infections — they aren't. Take it upon yourself to politely remind or ask all staff who approach you to sanitize their hands in front of you at your bedside.^[16] Some health care professionals might take mild offense to such a request, but be polite and remind them it's for *everybody's* safety. Hospital staff get busy and touch lots of people and equipment in a short period of time, so they're usually not being lazy or irresponsible, just harried and stressed.

- Hospitals that place dispensers of alcohol-based hand sanitizer at more locations (patient rooms, hallways, nursing stations, near elevators) see dramatic increases in the staff's compliance with basic hand hygiene — often from less than 50% compliance to 80% or more.^[17]
- Hospital staff often wear latex surgical gloves to protect themselves from patients, but sometimes forget that the gloves need to be changed on a very regular basis in order to ensure the patient's safety. It's not rude to request that a staff member change his gloves in front of you, but always be courteous.

- If you feel self-conscious about it, you can keep it light and say something like — "I'm a little paranoid about germs. It would make me feel a lot better if I could see you change your gloves."

3 Notify the staff of any spills, especially body fluids. If you notice any spills in your hospital room (or anywhere else in the hospital), notify the staff of it so they can properly clean it up. This is particularly important with body wastes (feces, urine) and other fluids (blood, vomit, saliva, mucus) because they tend to harbor various microorganisms that can lead to infections.^[18] However, spilled food and drink can also provide a breeding ground for bacteria and mold. The hospital staff should have strict protocols in how to deal with spills, and not just use a standard mop and bucket.

- Remember that patients and visitors should never clean up a spill in a hospital, even if you're just trying to help out and be nice. Let the professionals do their job and keep yourself safe.
- Body fluid/waste spills are much more common in intensive care, emergency and geriatric wards of a hospital, so be extra cautious if you are in such areas.

4 Make sure the hospital staff practices the aseptic technique. Observe if the procedures performed by the hospital staff are done using the "aseptic technique." The aseptic technique simply means that procedures and materials used on you are always clean and sterile.^[19] For example, any diagnostic instrument used on you should be either new, freshly sanitized or covered with a clean wrap, cover, tip, etc. Instruments or tools should not be used on you directly after another patient without some form of sanitation. The use of fresh gloves, masks, paper on examining tables and so on is also part of the aseptic technique.

- If you have an intravenous catheter in your arm, try to keep the skin around the dressing clean and dry. Tell the nurse immediately if the dressing works loose or gets wet, as that's a breach of the aseptic technique protocol.
- Ideally, hospital staff shouldn't wear rings, watches and jewelry around patients because they are difficult to sanitize. Feel free to ask them to remove such items while attending to you.

Tips

- If you're overweight, losing weight before entering the hospital will reduce your risk of infection following a surgical procedure.
- If you're a smoker, try stopping a few weeks before entering a hospital for a procedure. It will reduce the risk of developing a lung infection and also improve your healing abilities following surgery.
- Have your bed elevated to 20 degrees or more to decrease the risk of a lung infection, especially if you're ventilated while in bed.^[20]
- Make sure your friends, family and other visitors keep their hands washed and do not touch patients or surfaces while in the hospital.

Sources and Citations

1. <http://www.cdc.gov/hai/surveillance/index.html>
2. <http://www.cdc.gov/hai/>
3. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3963198/>

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