This leaflet explains surgical wound (operation wound) infections and the national programme for monitoring surgical wounds for infections. These type of infections are also known as surgical site infections.

**What is a surgical wound infection?**

There are lots of germs (micro-organisms such as bacteria) on our skin and in the environment around us. Most of them are harmless, but a few can cause infections. Our bodies have natural defences against the germs that can cause harm. Our skin normally prevents germs from entering our bodies but any break in the skin (whether due to injury or surgical incision) can allow them to enter and cause infection. A surgical wound infection can develop when germs from your skin or around you, enter the incision (cut) that the surgeon makes in your skin as part of your operation.

**When do surgical wound infections develop and how common are they?**

A surgical wound infection can develop at any time from two to three days after surgery until the wound has healed (usually two to three weeks after the operation). Very occasionally, an infection can occur several months after an operation, mostly when an artificial implant has been used, for example, a knee replacement.

Surgical wound infections are rare and usually only affect the skin, but can sometimes spread to deeper tissue. Infections are more likely to develop after surgery on parts of the body that naturally harbour lots of germs, such as the bowel.
What factors can increase the risk of surgical wound infection?

The risk depends on many factors and includes the following:

- your age and sex
- your general medical condition before your operation e.g. if you’re diabetic, a smoker, having radiotherapy or taking steroids
- if you have a poor diet and are overweight or malnourished
- the type of operation you have had
- how long your operation lasted

Data source: NICE Guideline for Surgical Site Infections: Prevention and Treatment

What can be done to reduce the risk of a surgical wound infection?

To help reduce this risk:

- You are advised to have (or be helped to have) a shower, bath or bed bath the day before or on the day of your surgery. You may also be prescribed an anti-bacterial body wash, hair wash, or nasal ointment to use before your surgery - you will be given instructions for using this if it’s prescribed.
- If your skin needs to be shaved before an operation, staff should use electric clippers with a disposable head. Please do not try to shave the area yourself.
- If indicated, you will be prescribed and given an appropriate antibiotic in the operating theatre to further reduce the risk of developing infection.
- Your skin will be cleaned with an antiseptic solution in the operating theatre before the incision is made.
- We use sterile instruments and staff wear sterile gowns and gloves during your operation.
• Your wound will be covered with a dressing which should be left in place for at least 48 hours.

**How will my wound be monitored?**

During your stay in hospital the nurse who changes your wound dressings will check for any signs of infection. If you are concerned about your wound, please speak to the nurse who is looking after you.

Staff will be following the Trust’s strict hand hygiene policy which involves the traditional hand washing methods as well as the use of alcohol gel for hand hygiene before touching your wound.

Don’t be tempted to remove your dressing, touch your wound or your wound drain. You may accidentally transfer germs from your fingers to your wound.

The hospital surgical wound infection surveillance nurse will visit you after your operation and will monitor your wound for a period of time. The surgical wound infection surveillance nurse will send you a questionnaire or contact you by telephone within 2 - 4 weeks of your discharge to ask if you have any problems with your wound.

**How would I know if I had a wound infection?**

You should watch for any of the following symptoms:

• The skin around your wound becoming red, swollen, hot or painful
• Your wound having a green or yellow coloured discharge (pus)
• Feeling generally unwell or feverish or if you develop a high temperature above 38°C (100.4°F)
What should I do if I have any of the above symptoms at home?

These symptoms could be a sign you have a wound infection. You should speak to the ward where you were an inpatient on the number they provided. Other contacts are your GP, your GP Out of Hours Service or you may choose to go to your nearest NHS Walk in Centre. Alternatively, you can call **NHS 111**, the NHS non-emergency number. 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

What happens if I develop a surgical wound infection?

Your nurse or doctor may take a swab from the surface of your wound and send it to a laboratory for testing. You may be given treatment with antibiotics.

What information do you pass on?

Public Health England (PHE) coordinates the national programme for monitoring surgical wound infection. As part of this programme, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust passes information about your operation to PHE. We use a specially generated serial number without any personal identification to transfer this data to them. PHE treats all information as strictly confidential and no data is published which could identify you as an individual.

What happens to the information?

Public Health England collects information from hospitals in England taking part in the national programme. The information is used to calculate rates of surgical wound infection for different types of operation. PHE publishes these rates each year - the latest report is available on their website - www.phe.gov.uk.
Who should I contact if I have any concerns?

If you have any worries or concerns you should contact the ward where you were an inpatient or your GP during normal surgery hours. Outside surgery hours, you should contact your GP’s surgery for the Out of Hours Service number. The NHS Walk In Centre in Sheffield can be contacted on 0114 241 2700.

Our own Surgical Site Infection Surveillance Team, part of our Infection Prevention and Control Team, can also be contacted Monday – Friday, 7.30am - 3.30pm on 0114 271 5496 or 0114 271 3971.