

## **PATIENT INFORMATION BROCHURE – HOSPITAL ACQUIRED INFECTIONS**

This information has been designed to assist you in understanding how infection occurs and what you can do to reduce your risk before and during your hospital stay.

### **ABOUT VICNISS**

The VICNISS Hospital Acquired Infection Surveillance program is a Victorian government funded initiative established in 2002. Its role is to assist Victorian hospitals to collect and interpret information about hospital-acquired infections. This will help hospitals carry out appropriate and targeted strategies to reduce these infections.

The VICNISS Coordinating Centre is the main point of contact for the VICNISS program, and is responsible for coordinating various surveillance activities throughout Victoria's public hospitals.

### **HOSPITAL ACQUIRED INFECTIONS (HAIs)**

Infections that people get whilst in hospital are known as Hospital-acquired Infections (HAIs).

For a patient, an infection can result in:

- illness,
- a longer stay in hospital; and
- a slower recovery.

HAIs are also costly to both the hospital and the community.

HAI's can occur for several reasons, not all of which are preventable. In most cases both patients and hospital staff can reduce the risk of getting HAIs.

### **WHY INFECTIONS OCCUR**

Often, some patients in hospital are vulnerable to getting an infection because they are very sick or have had an operation. They may also be at greater risk of getting an infection if they:

- are very young or very old.
- have underlying conditions such as diabetes.
- have a weak or compromised immune system such as those who are receiving chemotherapy.

Other reasons why HAIs may occur may be due to the type of procedures that are performed or the environment around them such as:

- Surgery (length of surgery, type, antibiotics given).
- Poor handwashing by both staff and patients.
- Presence of invasive devices eg. Intravenous drips and urinary catheters.
- Long length of hospital stay.
- A hospital stay in a high risk area eg. Intensive Care Units (ICUs).

## TYPES OF HAIs

Some examples of the most common HAIs are;

- Urinary tract infections.
- Pneumonia.
- Wound infections.

These HAIs are usually easy to treat and cure, but occasionally may be serious. Treatment often includes antibiotics; drugs that are effective in treating infections caused by bacteria.

Unfortunately, some bacteria are more difficult to treat because they have developed resistance to standard antibiotics. These bacteria are often called “superbugs”.

Two examples of “superbugs” are;

- ‘Staph’ or ‘golden staph’ - the real name of which is methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA); and
- Vancomycin resistant enterococcus (VRE), which is caused by a resistant germ.

The careful use of antibiotics, plus good handwashing are important in minimising the spread of MRSA and VRE.

Further information about resistant microorganisms is available from our brochure on multi-resistant organisms.

## REDUCING YOUR RISK

There are several things you can do to reduce your risk of HAIs.

### Before admission:

- Smoking: If you are a smoker, try to quit altogether, or at least reduce the number of cigarettes you are smoking. Smoking can slow down the healing process. By quitting smoking your body will have the best environment in which to heal. This is particularly important during surgery.
- Weight loss: People who are overweight have an increased risk of getting an infection following surgery. Eating a balanced, healthy diet and exercising will help you to reduce your weight before surgery.
- Cold or fever: Tell your doctor if you have a cold or fever before a planned operation needing general anaesthetic. This may influence your chance of developing a chest infection after the operation.
- Diabetes: If you have diabetes, you and your doctor should aim for careful control of your blood sugar levels before surgery- for some operations this may reduce the risk of infection after surgery.

### During your stay:

- **Wash hands** carefully after handling any type of dirty material, and after you have gone to the bathroom/toilet.
- Do not be afraid to remind doctors and nurses about **washing their hands** before working with you.
- If you have an **intravenous drip**, keep the skin around the dressing clean and dry. Tell your nurse promptly if the dressing works loose or gets wet. If your arm becomes red, swollen or painful near where the drip goes in, ask your nurse to have look at it. Sometimes it will require removal and replacement.

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- Likewise, if you have a *dressing on a wound*, let your nurse know promptly if it works loose or gets wet.
- If you have any type of *catheter or drainage tube*, let your nurse know promptly if it becomes loose or dislodged.
- Carefully follow your doctor's instructions regarding *breathing exercises* and getting out of bed. Don't be afraid to ask for help, advice, or sufficient pain medications to help you perform these exercises.
- If possible, ask your *friends and relatives* not to visit if they themselves feel ill or have a cold.

### MANAGEMENT

If you get an infection there may be extra preventative measures taken. These will depend on your hospital's protocols and procedures and the type of infection you have and how it is spread.

Some preventative measures may include:

- Being placed in a single room, or
- Being put last on the operative list, or
- Staff and/or visitors wearing gowns and gloves.

### VISITORS

Visitors are at a very low risk of acquiring HAIs because they are usually healthier and so are not as vulnerable as sick patients. However, there have been occasions when visitors have acquired vaccine preventable infections such as chickenpox, measles and flu.

There have also been instances where visitors who have had various infections, have unknowingly passed them on to the patient they are visiting or other patients in the hospital. A good general rule is that visitors who are not feeling well should postpone visits until they are feeling better.

Usually, patients can still have visitors if they have a HAI. Again depending on the type of infection, and how it is spread, your visitor may be asked to take some simple preventative measures. These might include wearing a gown during their visit and washing their hands before they leave. Appropriate advice will be provided by either the nursing or medical staff on the precise requirements.

### WHO TO INFORM

If you do get a HAI, information about the type you had and the treatment you received will usually be kept in your medical record. This information will be accessed if you are admitted to hospital in the future, and may also be used by the hospital when recording data on infections.

Also, when you are sent home from hospital, it is likely information about your HAI will be sent to your general practitioner so he/she is fully informed. If you don't need to see your GP after your hospital admission, it is a good idea to inform your GP on your next visit.

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## STRATEGIES IN PLACE

The Victorian Department of Human Services and healthcare facilities have put in place a number of strategies to reduce the risk of patients getting HAIs. Some of the strategies have included:

- Implementing Infection Control Policies;
- Developing a standard system for measuring how many infections we have in hospitals (VICNISS);
- Providing education and resources to the public and to providers of healthcare;
- Developing special tools to measure and improve healthcare workers' practices; and
- Not re-using single-use items.

## THINGS TO REMEMBER

1. A HAI may increase your hospital stay.
2. Some patients are more vulnerable to acquiring a HAI than others.
3. There are several things you can do to reduce your risk of HAIs.
4. Common types of HAI include; urinary tract infections, pneumonia, and wound infections.
5. Relatives and friends should not visit if they are not feeling well.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information about hospital acquired infections contact:

- Your hospital's infection control department.
- VICNISS Coordinating Centre: [www.vicniss.org.au](http://www.vicniss.org.au).

The information in this brochure has been compiled by the VICNISS Coordinating Centre. Some of this information was modified from National Patient Safety Foundation (NSPF), Preventing Infections in the Hospital – What You Can Do. A Consumer Fact Sheet. <http://www.npsf.org/download/PreventingInfections.pdf>. Accessed 12 March 2004.

**This material is for your information and is not intended to be medical advice. You are encouraged to review the information provided with your doctor or relevant health professional**

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