

Take an active role in your surgical recovery.

This useful guide provides some easy to follow steps to improve your surgical recovery and reduce your risk of surgical site infection.



What is a surgical site infection?

Germes are all around us. In fact, our bodies are home to an estimated 100 trillion 'friendly' germes, which are essential to our survival. Unfortunately, some germes can be harmful and can cause an infection.

A surgical site infection occurs when these harmful germes enter the incision (cut) made through your skin for surgery.



What are the symptoms of a surgical site infection?

Symptoms of an infection can include redness, swelling and pain around the surgical area, fever and/or discharge (pus) from the surgical wound. This may occur any time from 1–3 days after your operation until the wound has healed (usually 2–3 weeks after your operation).



How can I prevent getting a surgical site infection?

Thankfully, surgical site infections are uncommon and most only affect the skin, but some infections can spread to deeper tissue if not treated. Doctors and nurses are trained to ensure that the risk of you getting an infection is low, however, there are things you can do as a patient to help.



Before your surgery

1 Share your medical history



Before your surgery, your doctor or nurse will speak with you to check your medical history. This information will help your surgical team to tailor their care to make sure you have a safe operation and good recovery. You should let your doctor or nurse know if you:

- ▶ are diabetic
- ▶ smoke
- ▶ take steroids
- ▶ have been in hospital for a long time before your operation
- ▶ have had a blood transfusion before your operation
- ▶ have a known history of resistant bacteria
- ▶ have been in a hospital abroad
- ▶ had an SSI in the past
- ▶ have a known allergy for (certain) antibiotics

2 Stop smoking as soon as possible



People who smoke are more prone to developing infections and other complications related to surgery. The earlier you stop smoking, the better your chances of a good recovery. Ideally you should stop smoking at least four weeks before your operation.

If you are unable to stop smoking immediately, you should look to stop smoking at least 48 hours before your operation. You should also refrain from smoking for as long as possible after surgery, to help your overall recovery. Ask your medical team if you need help to stop smoking, if at least only temporarily.

3 Make positive lifestyle choices



Surgery places a lot of stress upon your body. After surgery your immune system will be working overtime to promote the healing of your surgical wound and fight off infection. To increase your immune systems effectiveness, you should consider physically preparing your body by:

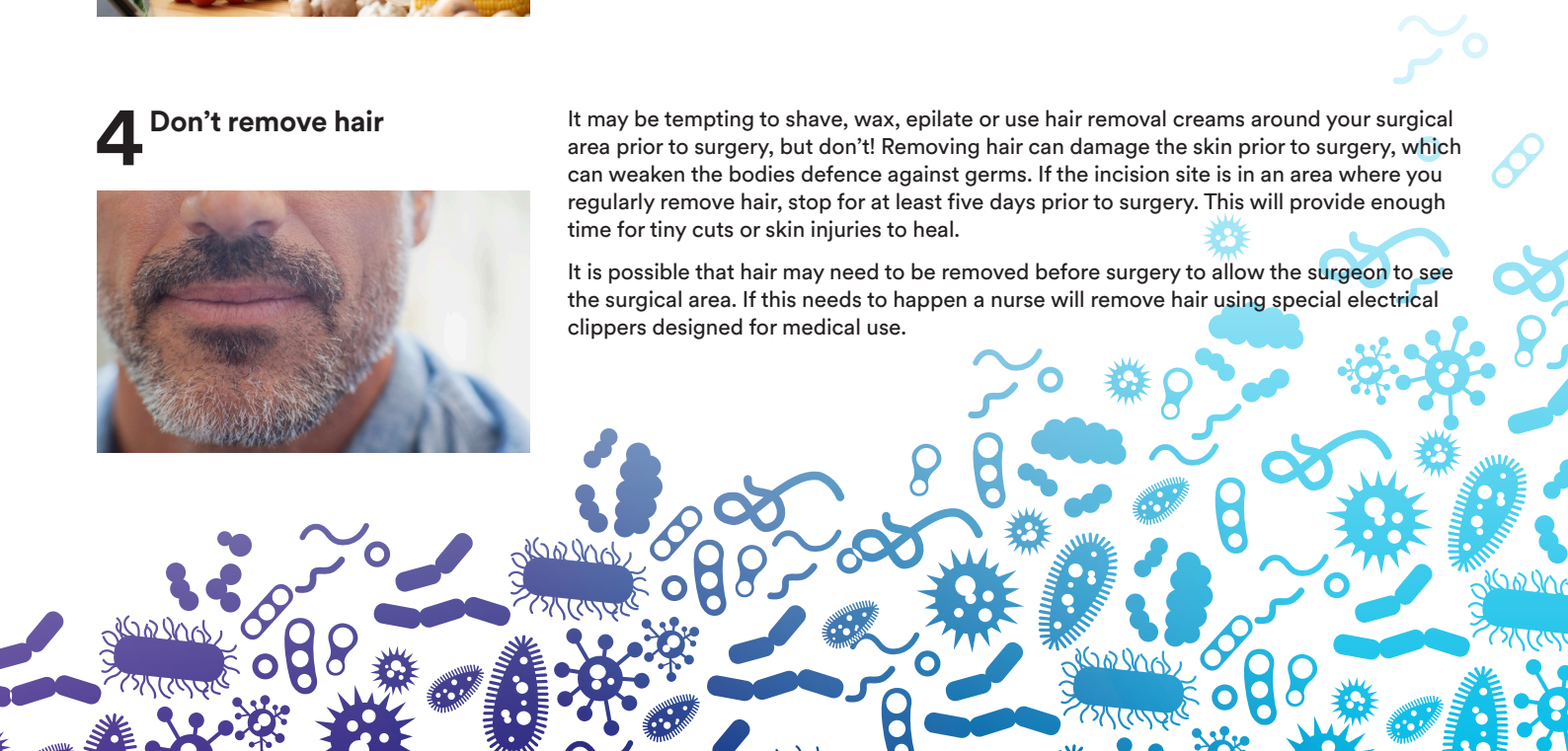
- ▶ Eating a well-balanced diet by selecting foods that are rich in vitamins, minerals and proteins
- ▶ Exercising regularly to build energy and maintain strength
- ▶ Avoiding excessive alcohol. Even moderate amounts of alcohol can weaken the immune system and slow down recovery

4 Don't remove hair



It may be tempting to shave, wax, epilate or use hair removal creams around your surgical area prior to surgery, but don't! Removing hair can damage the skin prior to surgery, which can weaken the bodies defence against germs. If the incision site is in an area where you regularly remove hair, stop for at least five days prior to surgery. This will provide enough time for tiny cuts or skin injuries to heal.

It is possible that hair may need to be removed before surgery to allow the surgeon to see the surgical area. If this needs to happen a nurse will remove hair using special electrical clippers designed for medical use.



At the time of your surgery

5 Shower or bathe on the day of your operation



Have a hot shower or bath using plain soap on the night before your surgery and/or in the morning on the day of your surgery. Your doctor may give you special instructions to use an antiseptic soap instead of plain soap.

6 Keep yourself warm



Patients that are kept warm before, during and after surgery will resist infections better than patients who are cold. You can help to keep yourself warm by:

- ▶ Bringing extra clothes such as slippers, a dressing gown, vest and other warm clothing
- ▶ Asking for additional blankets to keep you warm during transportation from the ward to the operating room
- ▶ Wearing the gown given to you as near to the time of surgery as possible, to avoid getting cold
- ▶ Informing the medical staff if you feel cold at any point

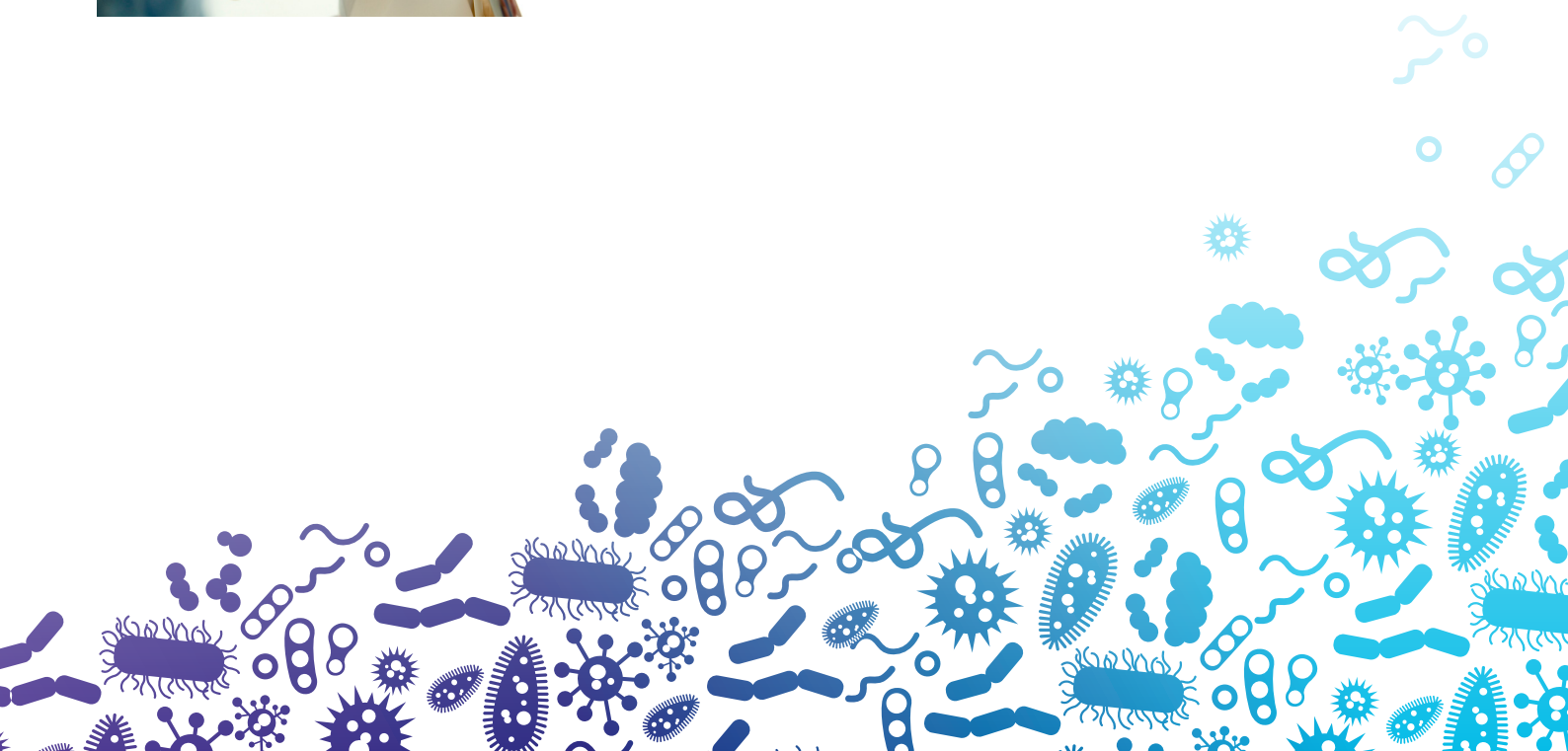
Your medical team may also provide you with a warming gown, which gently blows warm air over the skin, to increase your temperature.

7 Ensure hands are kept clean



Maintaining clean hands can help stop the spread of harmful germs that can cause infection. Encourage the people around you to make sure their hands are clean.

- ▶ Family and friends should clean their hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub before and after visiting you. If you do not see them clean their hands, ask them to clean their hands
- ▶ Make sure that your medical team clean their hands before examining you, either with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub



After surgery

8 Look after your wound



Your wound dressing should remain in place for 48 hours after surgery, unless it leaks or bleeds. If this happens, you should ask for help to change the dressing. Make sure that anyone (including yourself), cleans their hands before touching the wound.

Baths, saunas or swimming are not usually recommended during the first two weeks following surgery, ask your doctor when it is safe for your wound to be in contact with water.

9 Know the signs of a surgical site infection and speak up



Before you go home, make sure you know who to contact if you have questions or problems after you get home. 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 you have a high temperature above 38°C (100.4°F)

If you have any symptoms of an infection, call your doctor immediately.

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