



Health Care Associated Infections

Infections that people get whilst being cared for in a healthcare facility are known as healthcare-associated infections (HCAI).

For a patient, an infection can result in:

- illness
- an extended stay in hospital
- a slower recovery
- increased stress
- lower morale

HCAIs are costly to the patient, hospital and the community. HCAIs can occur for several reasons, not all of which are preventable. In most cases both patients and hospital staff can help to reduce the risk of getting HCAIs.

Why do infections occur?

Some patients in hospital are more 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 medical conditions eg. diabetes
- have a weakened or compromised immune system eg. patients receiving chemotherapy

Other reasons why HCAIs 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 hand hygiene by both staff and patients
- Presence of invasive devices eg. intravenous drips or urinary catheters
- Longer length of hospital stay
- A hospital stay in a high risk area eg. Intensive Care Units (ICUs)
- Use of particular medications



Types of Healthcare Associated Infections

Some common HCAs are:

- Urinary tract infections
- Pneumonia
- Wound infections

These HCAs are usually easy to treat and cure, but occasionally may be serious. Treatment often includes the use of 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 sometimes referred to as “superbugs”. Two examples of “superbugs” are:

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

The appropriate use of antibiotics, and good Hand Hygiene are important in minimising the spread of these "superbugs".

Reducing your risk

There are several things that you can do to optimise your health and reduce your risk of HCAs:

During your stay

- **Wash your 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 **hand hygiene**

References:

VICNISS Patient Information Brochure: Hospital Acquired Infections

<http://www.vicniss.org.au/Consumer/FactsheetHAI.aspx>

National Patient Safety Foundation (NPSF), Preventing infections in the hospital - what can you do. A consumer fact sheet.

www.npsf.org/download/PreventingInfections.pdf

World Alliance for Patient Safety. Who Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Healthcare (Advanced Draft): Global patient safety challenge 2005-2006: Clean care is safer care. World Health Organisation; 2005.

Prevent Infection website

www.preventinfection.org