

Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

## Healthcare-Associated Infection

Information for Patients and Visitors 2008

**Clean your hands. Say no to infection.**



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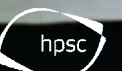
A Strategy for the Control of  
Antimicrobial Resistance in Ireland



Produced on behalf of the Infection Control Sub-Committee of the  
Strategy for the Control of Antimicrobial Resistance in Ireland (SARI)



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**Q. What is a healthcare-associated infection?**

A healthcare-associated infection is an infection that someone gets after being in hospital or after receiving medical treatment. Healthcare-associated infections that are picked-up in hospital are also known as “hospital-acquired infections”. Healthcare-associated infections are most often linked to treatment in hospitals, but can happen after treatment in outpatient clinics, nursing homes and other healthcare settings.

**Q. Are healthcare-associated infections a new problem?**

No. Infections have always been a side effect of medical treatment, especially in hospitals. Healthcare-associated infections may have been just as common, or even more common, in the past, but may not have been spotted or reported. We are more aware of healthcare-associated infections today, because we are better able to spot and report these infections now than in the past.

There are reasons why healthcare-associated infections are still a problem, such as:

- More 'high risk' people are being treated than ever before, such as elderly patients or patients with severe or long-term diseases.
- Better medical treatments allow us to treat diseases that, in the past, could not be cured. These treatments may save people's lives but at the same time may leave them more at risk of getting an infection.
- More patient movement between wards due to pressures on hospital beds.
- More use of antibiotics and the emergence of antibiotic-resistant germs.

**Q. How common are healthcare-associated infections?**

About one in ten patients who are admitted to hospital develop an infection. This figure varies from time to time. It can also vary between hospitals and between types of patients. For example, patients in the Intensive Care Unit are more likely to develop an infection than those in other parts of the hospital, because they are usually sicker and have more risk factors.

**Q. What sorts of patients develop healthcare-associated infections?**

The more medical care a person requires, the more likely they are to develop an infection. Healthcare-associated infections are most common in people with serious illnesses or risk factors, such as:

- Patients with large wounds, following surgery, burns or a serious accident
- Patients who are on a drip (intravenous line) or other medical device for a long period of time
- Patients with a weakened immune system, like patients who have been treated for leukaemia or cancer, or who have had a transplant

Patients who do not have a serious illness and are admitted to hospital for a short time are at low risk of developing infection.

**Q. What types of healthcare-associated infections are there?**

The most common is bladder or kidney infection, usually following the insertion of a catheter or a tube to help drain urine. Other types of healthcare-associated infection include pneumonia, which can happen in the Intensive Care Unit where a patient is on a life-support machine, surgical wound infection, which may follow major surgery, device-related infection which can happen when an intravascular device ('drip') is used and bacteremia ('blood poisoning').

**Q. What impact do healthcare-associated infections have?**

Most common healthcare-associated infections only cause a minor illness that is easily treated and does not have any long-term effects. However, some healthcare-associated infections can cause serious illness that can lead to a person having to stay in hospital longer and result in long-term ill effects. Some of the less common types of healthcare-associated infection, such as pneumonia or blood poisoning, can cause very serious illness and, unfortunately, sometimes death.

**Q. How are healthcare-associated infections prevented and controlled?**

About one third of healthcare-associated infections can be prevented. The best way to prevent infection is through good professional practice including hand-hygiene and appropriate care when dealing with patients. Some patients with healthcare-associated infections may require isolation (i.e., placing a patient in a single room to keep them from other patients). Most hospitals check these infections to make sure that control measures are working, and there is ongoing education for doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals.

**Q. Where can I find further information about healthcare-associated infections?**

The doctors and nurses on the ward on which you are being cared for can provide you with more information on healthcare-associated infections. The local infection control team can also provide additional information. General information on healthcare-associated infections is also available from the following websites:

- Health Protection Surveillance Centre  
**[www.hpsc.ie](http://www.hpsc.ie)**
- Health Protection Agency (UK)  
**[www.hpa.org.uk](http://www.hpa.org.uk)**
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (USA)  
**[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)**