



Australian Government  
National Health and  
Medical Research Council

# Healthcare Associated Infections

## Consumer factsheet

### What are healthcare associated infections?

Although health professionals try to give the best possible care sometimes things can go wrong and patients can get an infection.

**Healthcare associated infections (HAI)** are infections that occur as a result of healthcare interventions and are caused by micro-organisms - such as bacteria and viruses.

They can happen when you are being treated in hospital, at home, in a GP clinic, a nursing home or any other healthcare facility.

### How do they happen?

Some infections occur after an invasive procedure such as surgery and can be treated easily with antibiotics. However there are some infections such as Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci (VRE) and diarrhoeal diseases such as Clostridium difficile that are more difficult to treat because they are resistant to certain antibiotics.

The risk of getting these infections depends on how healthy you are, how long you have been in hospital, and certain medications that you take (including some antibiotics).

These specific infections require the use of special antibiotics and, at times, special precautions which may include placement in a single room and the use of personal protective equipment such as gloves and gowns.

### Can they be prevented?

Although it is a great challenge there are a number of things that can be done to prevent healthcare associated infections.

Healthcare facilities use a range of procedures, policies and structures to reduce the risk of infection. You will see healthcare workers do the following things to prevent and control the spread of infection:

- washing hands with soap or using alcohol based hand rubs
- maintaining a clean environment
- wearing personal protective equipment such as gloves, gowns, masks and goggles
- isolating people who have an infective illness
- using sterilised equipment

### What can I do?

Everyone, including - healthcare workers, patients and visitors - have a role in preventing and controlling healthcare associated infection.

There are a number of things you can do to reduce the risk of infection:

- The best way to prevent infections is to **clean your hands** carefully with soap and water or use an alcohol based hand rub.
- Do not be afraid to ask a healthcare worker if they have cleaned their hands.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze (or into your elbow if you don't have a tissue) and clean your hands afterwards.
- Report any infections you have had, especially if you are still on antibiotics.
- Make sure you take the full course of antibiotics you are given, even if you are feeling better.
- If you have a dressing or a wound, keep the skin around the dressing clean and dry. Let the healthcare worker who is looking after you know promptly if it becomes loose or wet.

- Tell the healthcare worker who is looking after you if the drips, lines, tubes or drains inserted into your body or the area around them becomes red, swollen or painful.
- Follow instructions you are given on looking after wounds or medical devices you have. Ask if you are not sure of what to do.
- Let the healthcare worker who is looking after you know if your room or equipment hasn't been cleaned properly.
- Stop smoking before any surgery, as smoking increases the risk of infection.

## When should I clean my hands?

- before touching or eating food
- after you have gone to the bathroom/toilet
- after sneezing, coughing or disposing of tissues
- before touching your eyes, nose or mouth
- after handling dirty clothes or linen
- before and after touching a wound or its dressing.

## If you are a visitor or carer

- Do not visit someone in hospital if you feel unwell or have a cold, have been vomiting or had diarrhoea. Wait until you feel better.
- Clean your hands with alcohol hand rub or soap and water before visiting friends/relatives, and before going home.
- Avoid bringing too many visitors at one time to visit someone. Always check with the healthcare facility staff.
- Be careful not to touch dressings, drips or other equipment around the bed.

## How can I find out more about HAI?

Please speak to the healthcare worker looking after you or your family.

## Where can I find out more information about HAI?

The infection prevention and control professional at the healthcare facility will be able to provide additional information.

Consumer guides are also available on specific healthcare associated infections such as Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci (VRE) and Clostridium difficile from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (ACSQHC) websites. [www.nhmrc.gov.au](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au)  
[www.safetyandquality.gov.au](http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au)

## References

NHMRC (2010) Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare [www.nhmrc.gov.au](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au)  
Hand Hygiene Australia (2008) Health Care Associated Infections [www.hha.org.au/ForConsumers/FactSheets.aspx#HCAI](http://www.hha.org.au/ForConsumers/FactSheets.aspx#HCAI)

## Acknowledgements

Tasmanian Infection Prevention & Control Unit, Department of Health and Human Service.  
Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care. [www.safetyandquality.gov.au](http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au)