What you can do to prevent infections and stay healthy in the hospital.

Germs are everywhere. Most of the time they don't make us sick because our bodies have strong defenses—like our skin and our immune systems—that keep us healthy. But when you're in the hospital, you can be at greater risk of getting an infection because your immune system may be weakened and your skin may have open wounds from surgery or tubes. Hospitals are also places where germs and people at risk for infection come together. This gives germs a chance to move from one person to another.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, each year, more than 1.7 million people get infections while they are in the hospital. Fortunately there are things your health care team—your doctor, nurses, medical aides and others—can do to prevent them.

You—as a part of the team—can do some important but simple things to prevent infection.

Everyone Washes Their Hands

The most powerful thing you, your health care team and your visitors can do to prevent infections is also the most simple. Everyone needs to wash their hands.

- **Wash your hands.** You need to make sure that your hands are clean. Wash them regularly with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

- **Know that all health care workers should clean their hands before and after touching you.** In many hospitals, doctors and nurses are encouraging patients to ask them if they've washed their hands. So don't be afraid to remind everyone on your medical team, from your doctor to the aide who helps you, to wash their hands before and after they touch you.

- **Remind your visitors to wash their hands.** When loved ones come to see you, ask them to wash their hands before and after their visit. Explain why it's important to them and to you.

If you are visiting a patient, make sure to wash your hands before entering their room. It's good for your health and for theirs.

Protect Your Skin

Your skin is a natural defense against infection because it keeps germs out. To prevent infection, make sure all wounds and cuts are covered and bandages are changed regularly. This will keep them clean and protected from infection so they can heal.

If You Are Having Surgery

- **Before your surgery.** If you are scheduled to have surgery, you will get instructions on what to do before you come to the hospital. This may include how to prepare your skin, medications you should or shouldn't take, and other instructions depending on the type of surgery. Following these instructions carefully can help prevent infection and other problems.

- **After your surgery.** You may be given instructions about what to do after you leave the hospital. This may include medications, how to care for your surgery site and activities to avoid. Be sure to follow these instructions carefully, including when and who to call if you think you are having a problem. This helps reduce the risk of infection and, if you get an infection, allows for it to be taken care of early.

- **Take antibiotics as directed.** If antibiotics are prescribed for you before or after your surgery, make sure you take them as directed and for the full course ordered. This will help cure infections better and reduce the risk of your getting an infection that is harder to cure.

If You Have a Catheter

A catheter is a small tube that can be used to deliver fluids, medication, or nutrition into your body through your blood. A catheter can also be used to drain fluids from wounds or remove urine from your bladder. If you have a catheter or drain inserted, you may need to go home with it in place. So, prevention of infection continues after you leave the hospital.

- **Ask your doctor or another member of your health care team to explain why you need a catheter or drain and what you should do to avoid infection.** Find out how long you will need to have it in place, and how you can work with your health care team to make sure you stay infection-free.

- **Follow instructions for the care of your catheter or drain.** Make sure you understand what you and others providing care to you need to do to keep your catheter or drain working as it should and uninfected.

- **Check your catheter or drain often.** If the bandage becomes wet or dirty, or the catheter or drain falls out, tell your doctor or nurse.

Remember, everyone on your health care team is working to help you to stay healthy while you are in the hospital. Always feel free to speak up and ask your doctor and others on your team what you can do to help prevent infection and get better quickly. For additional information on infection prevention, visit:

  –www.mass.gov/dph/dhcq
  –www.mass.gov/dph/betsylehman
  –www.partnershipforhealthcare.org