

Prevent Hospital Infections

By Amy Capetta Jul 30th 2010 1:24PM

At least 103,000 lives are lost each year due to hospital-related infections, killing more Americans each year than AIDS, breast cancer and auto accidents combined, according to the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths, a not-for-profit educational campaign committed to preventing hospital infections. After serving as Lt. Governor of New York State, patient advocate Dr. Betsy McCaughey, founded this organization in 2004 after hearing countless stories of how families lost loved ones due to a hospital infection.

“Once I discovered that at least 90 percent of these infections are preventable and these types of infections are costing us \$30 billion a year to treat, I knew I had to do something — especially knowing that we have the knowledge to prevent this problem,” McCaughey told AOL Health.

Below are six precautionary tips that can significantly decrease your chances of becoming a victim during your next trip to the hospital, whether you’re a patient or a visitor:

Ask everyone who examines you to wash their hands.

“This is first and foremost — do not be intimidated by the white coat,” stated McCaughey. “And do not be falsely assured by white gloves. Think about this: If your nurse or doctor forgets to wash his or her hands and then pulls on a pair of white gloves, those gloves automatically become contaminated before they even touch you.” In fact, one study published in the journal *Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology* showed that 42 percent of gloves worn by hospital employees who had no direct patient contact but who touched contaminated surfaces became contaminated. “If you’re feeling shy about speaking up, just keep in mind that your life is at stake.”

Shower with chlorhexidine soap four days before surgery.

“This prescription and non-prescription



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soap can remove any dangerous bacteria that may be lingering on your skin, which can infect your interior once your skin is opened for surgery,” said McCaughey. One clinical study concluded that two chlorhexidine showers reduced infection rates between 30 and 50 percent. “Bathing four days before with this soap can also reduce the risk of a post-op infection by 66 percent or more,” added McCaughey.

Refuse to be shaved before surgery.

“Make sure no one shaves you,” urged McCaughey. “Razors are just a welcome mat for bacteria since one little nick in the skin can provide an area where bacteria can enter the body.” Instead, insist that hair be removed with a pair of clippers. A study conducted by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement concluded that clipping instead of shaving had been proven to decrease infection rates.

Avoid a urinary tract catheter when possible.

“Believe it or not, a catheter — a tube that allows waste to flow from the bladder — is

not always medically necessary,” said McCaughey. “In many cases, they are used because the hospital can be busy, so this will eliminate one less chore for the nurses and hospital staff.” A study published in the *Journal of Infection* found that urinary tract infections are the most common hospital-acquired infections and that limiting the use of a catheter will greatly reduce this risk. “If you are given a catheter, then make sure to continuously ask your doctor or nurse if the catheter can be removed during each one of their visits.”

Keep utensils on your plate at all times.

“A bacteria named *Clostridium difficile* [or *C. diff*] is quickly becoming the most common bacteria found in hospitals,” explained McCaughey. “While the ‘popular’ infections are transferred via incisions, needles — like a catheter — and on ventilators, the *C. diff* spores live for days on surfaces, like snack tables, call buttons, faucets and doorknobs to name a few, and can only be ingested orally, which means a patient gives herself this type of infection.”

Researchers at Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland VA Medical Center found that 78 percent of surfaces were still contaminated after a routine cleaning since bleach is necessary to kill this germ. “And according to one study, more than 20 percent of nurses’ uniforms had C. diff on them by the end of just one workday,” said McCaughey. “So for both patients and visitors, keep your hands out of your mouth, do not allow your utensils or straws to come in contact with anything but your plate or cup and wash your hands with anti-bacterial soap and water as often as possible.” She added to also clean all clothes worn in the hospital with bleach and to wash these clothes in a separate load from your family’s garments.

Do not touch a privacy curtain.

“There is no need to touch these curtains in the emergency room or hospital room,” stated McCaughey. “Instead, just elbow your way in.” These curtains are a “major vector for disease” and can be laced with the C. diff bacteria spores. While some hospitals are now installing disposable privacy curtains, most of the existing curtains are rarely cleaned. If the curtain must be closed, McCaughey advised donning a pair of gloves before touching the material. Then immediately dispose the gloves (taking them off from the wrist) and wash your hands. “And if you notice a hospital professional touching the curtain with their hand before examining you, ask them to wash their hands and/or change their gloves.”

For more information, go to www.hospitalinfection.org/

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