Infection Control - The Facts, The Myths

The Importance of Clean Hands

Healthcare associated infections when caught can possibly cause serious health problems. However by reading and following this simple guide there are things we can do as patients to assist healthcare staff in preventing healthcare associated infection.

The Facts

Bacteria (bugs) surround us all the time.

Bugs are passed on in three ways:
1. Direct contact with other individuals
2. Indirect contact with those who have not washed their hands
3. Indirect contact with an environment that has not been properly cleaned in between patients.

Most Infections are treatable

Individuals with open wounds or medical devices such as catheters, lines and feeding tubes are most at risk of acquiring an infection.

Some common healthcare infections you may have heard of are MRSA and Clostridium difficile. However, any bacteria can potentially cause a healthcare associated infection.

Bacteria can be present anywhere on an individual but it doesn’t always cause an infection.

How do people get healthcare associated infections?

There are many myths surrounding healthcare associated infection. Here are a few of the more common myths:
- Patients have to be in hospital to get an infection.
- I can stop taking antibiotics immediately when I feel better
- All infections caught in hospital are resistant to most of the antibiotics that would be used to treat them
- Cleaning of the environment alone will stop all infections being passed on.
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What can be done to help prevent health care associated infections?

Healthcare associated infections can be prevented in a number of ways. It is not just down to healthcare staff we too can play our part.

General hand hygiene in the home

It’s good to get into the habit of washing hands regularly particularly:
- After using the toilet / changing nappies
- After touching animals or animal waste
- After handling rubbish
- Before and after preparing food and drinks
- After blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing
- When hands look and feel dirty.

When visited by healthcare staff in your home:

When you are receiving care from a healthcare professional they will clean their hands before they treat you.

Try to provide facilities for staff to wash their hands effectively. Staff will need some liquid soap, warm water and a clean towel or kitchen roll.

Make sure the sink is free from pots.

General surfaces should also be uncluttered in case staff need to get equipment out.
- Don’t be afraid to ask if they have cleaned their hands before they begin treatment
- If having a wound dressed try to keep pets away from the area in which the nurse is working
- Advise people to only visit you at home if they have no illnesses such as coughs, colds and diarrhoea.
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When visiting healthcare premises as a patient or visitor:

- Don’t be afraid to point out to staff areas that you feel are dirty or cluttered
- Don’t be afraid to ask staff if they have cleaned their hands before they begin treatments
- Always remember to clean your hands before and after leaving healthcare premises.

It’s OK to ask

If you have any concerns about cleanliness, MRSA and how it is treated ask the nurse, they can help put your mind at rest.

Don’t be frightened to ask your carers if they've washed their hands. They will expect it and by doing so you will be helping to control infection.
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Clean hands

Washing your hands with soap and clear running water for 30 seconds will go a long way towards fighting infection.

When you wash your hands it is important to include palms, thumbs and fingers, including tips, and backs of hands. The recommended way of washing your hands is shown below.

1. Wet hands with water
2. Apply enough soap to cover all hand surfaces
3. Rub hands palm to palm
4. Rub back of each hand with palm of other hand with fingers interlaced
5. Rub palm to palm with fingers interlaced
6. Rub back of interlaced fingers
7. Rub each thumb clasped in opposite hand using a rotational movement
8. Rub tips of fingers in opposite palm in circular motion
9. Rinse hands with water
10. Dry thoroughly

When your hands are visibly clean apply the cleansing gel / hand rub in the same way you wash your hands. There is no need to rinse; the gel will evaporate after 15 seconds.