What you need to do to prevent infection

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Please contact the Communications and PR Team Tel: 0191 529 7118
Email: mopil@sotw.nhs.uk

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Author: Community Infection Prevention Control Nurse
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Introduction

Germs (bacteria, viruses) grow and multiply in many common environments including soil, water, food, and on and in our bodies. Most of the time, people and germs live together causing the person no harm; in fact, humans couldn’t live in a germ-free world. But some germs are also the source of many human illnesses.

How Infections are spread?

For an infection to spread there must be a germ present which multiplies and goes on to cause disease. Germs can be passed from one person to another by physical contact. There are also other ways in which infection is spread, for example touching, or using equipment that has not been cleaned properly. Infection can be carried in the environment by the air, water, animals and insects.

People who are particularly prone to infection are usually the very old, very young, people who are already ill and those who don’t have much resistance to infection. People who have wounds or catheters are also more at risk.

What can you do to help prevent infections?

DO
- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water
- Ask other members of the family to wash their hands and not touch or interfere with any dressings or equipment e.g. catheters
- Ask all staff who care for you to wash their hands before they start any treatment

DON’T
- Touch, pick or scratch any wounds or catheters
- Try not to show your wound to family or friends
- If friends or family have an infection ask them not to visit you until they are well

Hand Washing

Regular, careful hand washing is vital at all times. Unwashed hands are a very easy way of spreading germs and causing infection.

When to wash your hands
- If your hands look dirty
- Before and after any activity that could have dirtied your hands even if they look clean
- Going to the toilet
- Before and after preparing food
- After handling any pets
- Before and after contact with any wounds or dressings or with any equipment e.g. catheter or feeding tubes
- If you are caring for more than one person at home then remember to wash your hands in between looking after each person

All healthcare staff are trained in using standard infection control precautions when caring for patients, for example wearing gloves, aprons and hand washing. People need to follow these standard precautions if caring for a relative or themselves.

Please ask your healthcare professional if you are unsure of how to wash your hands properly. Alcohol gel will only be used by your healthcare professional if there is no suitable hand washing facilities available.