Simple Measures Cut Surgery-Linked Infections

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Preventing surgery-linked infections is a major concern for hospitals and it turns out some simple measures can make a big difference.

A project at seven big hospitals reduced infections after colorectal surgeries by nearly one-third. It prevented an estimated 135 infections, saving almost $4 million, the Joint Commission hospital regulating group and the American College of Surgeons announced Wednesday. The two groups directed the 2 1/2-year project.

Solutions included having patients shower with special germ-fighting soap before surgery, and having surgery teams change gowns, gloves and instruments during operations to prevent spreading germs picked up during the procedures.

Some hospitals used special wound-protecting devices on surgery openings to keep intestine germs from reaching the skin.

The average rate of infections linked with colorectal operations at the seven hospitals dropped from about 16 percent of patients during a nine-month phase when hospitals started adopting changes to almost 11 percent once all the changes had been made.

Hospital stays for patients who got infections dropped from an average of 15 days to 13 days, which helped cut costs.

"The improvements translate into safer patient care," said Dr. Mark Chassin, president of the Joint Commission. "Now it's our job to spread these effective interventions to all hospitals."

Almost 2 million health care-related infections occur each year nationwide; more than 90,000 of these are fatal.

Besides wanting to keep patients healthy, hospitals have a monetary incentive to prevent these infections. Medicare cuts payments to hospitals that have lots of certain health care-related infections, and those cuts are expected to increase under the new health care law.

The project involved surgeries for cancer and other colorectal problems. Infections linked with colorectal surgery are particularly common because intestinal tract bacteria are so abundant.

To succeed at reducing infection rates requires hospitals to commit to changing habits, "to really look in the mirror and identify these things," said Dr. Clifford Ko of the American College of Surgeons.

The hospitals involved were Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles; Cleveland Clinic in Ohio; Mayo Clinic-Rochester Methodist Hospital in Rochester, Minn.; North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System in Great Neck, NY; Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago; OSF Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria, Ill.; and Stanford Hospital & Clinics in Palo Alto, Calif.

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