

# Protect Your Health from Infections



## What Is an Infection?

An infection is the growth of unwanted bacteria, viruses, or other one-celled organisms in the body. Infections interfere with normal body functions. Once an infection becomes established, you should contact a physician about possible medical treatment.

Viruses and bacteria are everywhere, but they do not always cause infections. An infection happens when a disease-causing organism enters a body system (e.g., respiratory, reproductive, or digestive system) where conditions allow it to live and multiply. Whether or not this happens depends on how the organism enters the body, what kind of organism it is, how many viruses or bacteria attack, and the health of the person.

## Reduce Infections

Since viruses and bacteria that cause infections cannot be seen, you may ignore them or fear the illnesses they can cause. A more effective approach is to try to increase the ability of your body to resist infection, avoid the activities that make infection more likely, and reduce your contact with bacteria and viruses, whenever possible, by using common-sense precautions.

## Maximize Your Body's Resistance to Viruses and Bacteria

Regularly review your immunizations with a health-care provider. You do not need to be an expert on immunizations, but you do need to ask for a review of your immunizations regularly, even if your health provider doesn't mention it. Never assume you or any dependent family member has had all the shots.

Use antibiotics carefully and only after asking your doctor about alternative treatments. Find out what the likelihood is that you will heal without antibiotics. If you reach a mutual decision to use antibiotics, be sure you find out how to take them correctly. Frequent or ineffective use of antibiotics can reduce your body's defenses against later infection.

Take care of your body's defenses by eating a well-balanced diet that is rich in vitamins, getting adequate rest and relaxation, and exercising moderately on a regular basis. Prompt attention to skin irritations, cuts, and scrapes will maintain your most effective barrier against viruses and bacteria.

## Avoid Activities that Make Infections More Likely

Avoid sharing personal items, such as razors, drinking glasses, cosmetics, manicure equipment, pierced earrings, medical equipment or needles, combs, brushes, towels and washcloths, hats, and toothbrushes. Sharing these items may also share lice, fungal infections, and assorted bacteria and viruses.

Develop habits that discourage the spread of bacteria and viruses. Here are some examples:

- Avoid touching your face, especially your eyes, nose, and mouth, with dirty hands.
- Use tissues carefully, and dispose of them in the trash after a single use.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or clean hands when you sneeze or cough—the velocity of a cough can be 60 miles or more per hour.
- Wash your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds before eating and after using the restroom. Scrub well and rinse well.

Use effective housekeeping to avoid infection. Focus housekeeping on your laundry, kitchen, and bathroom. Use the cleaning solutions described in the following section on **Common Sense Precautions**.

Keep toothbrushes away from the toilet, and disinfect or replace toothbrushes regularly. To disinfect a toothbrush, run it through a dishwasher cycle or soak it in a mild solution of 1 tablespoon of bleach in 2 gallons of water, and rinse well. Also use this mild solution of bleach to disinfect kitchen counters, sinks, and cutting boards in the kitchen. Eating utensils can be rinsed in hot water or washed in the dishwasher.

If you want to avoid the chances of infections even more, change towels, pillowcases, washcloths, socks, and underwear frequently, and wash them with a disinfectant for laundry.

Avoid risky sexual and drug-use behaviors that expose you to deadly diseases. If you are not sure if your behaviors are risky, ask for information from your health provider, the local health department, or a substance-abuse/chemical-dependency treatment center. You also can call the Mississippi State University Extension Service in your county, or the Centers for Disease Control National STD and AIDS hotline at 1-800-232-4636, 1-800-344-7432 (Spanish), or 1-800-234-7889 (hearing impaired).

## Use Common-Sense Precautions

Body fluids that may be infected with bacteria or viruses include blood, male and female sexual fluids, saliva, vomit, urine, and feces. There is a high risk of infection with HIV (AIDS virus) and hepatitis B when infected body fluids enter the body through sexual contact or shared drug equipment.

Although the risk is remote with other types of contact with these infected body fluids, experts do recommend some precautions. Some of these precautions are easily adapted for daily life and make good sense because they also protect you from other viruses and bacteria.

- Wear gloves when cleaning body fluids or dirty items. Bandage any cuts or scrapes before putting on gloves. Remove the gloves without touching the dirty side, and wash your hands after removing the gloves. Disposable latex gloves are best; reusable gloves may spread infection.

- Take care with trash. Never push down the trash with your hands or feet, and never reach into the trash. Empty the trash onto a newspaper to search for missing items with your eyes instead of your hands. Dispose of sharp items in a puncture-resistant container.
- Clean up body fluids and bathrooms with an EPA-approved germicide labeled “tuberculocidal,” or use a 1:100 solution of bleach (1 tablespoon bleach per cup of water or one-fourth cup bleach to a gallon of water) after using disposable gloves and towels to clean any body fluids that can be seen. Dispose of the towels and gloves in a plastic bag, and soak mops in a bleach solution for 10 minutes after use. Be alert to the hazards of bleach or other chemicals.
- Wash and dry hands thoroughly after using the toilet, after cleaning, and before eating or preparing food. Excessive hand-washing may be harmful if skin irritation occurs, but regular washing with a mild soap is helpful. Using an antibacterial soap can reduce bacteria and viruses, but the benefits must be balanced against the risk of skin irritation.

Protecting your health and the health of those around you depends on many factors. Chances are that most of these precautions are a routine part of your life. Other strategies may be new.

As with most life changes, practice will make it all seem simple. If you avoid even an occasional illness by using the tips mentioned, life will be that much nicer.

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Information Sheet 1531 (POD-04-17)

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Produced by Agricultural Communications.

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Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. GARY B. JACKSON, Director