

Guidance at a Glance – Healthcare associated infections

These guidelines support the delivery of care in community and social care settings. This guidance reflects best practice/national guidelines.

KEY POINTS

Healthcare associated infections (HCAI) are infections that develop as a direct result of healthcare intervention. HCAs can occur anywhere that healthcare is provided, e.g. hospitals, care homes, in a service user's own home, dental surgery and health centre.

An infection occurs when micro-organisms (germs) enter the body and cause damage. These micro-organisms can come from a variety of sources, and often enter the body through invasive medical devices, for example a urinary catheter. Some can reach the bloodstream (Bacteraemia), causing serious or life threatening infection.

THE CHAIN OF INFECTION

The spread of micro-organisms from their source to a person is frequently referred to as the chain of infection - made up of six links. Each link represents one of the six elements required to spread infection. Each link of the chain must be present for an infection to occur.

- Infectious agent – Micro-organisms (bacteria, viruses, fungi) e.g. Clostridium Difficile, MRSA, Norovirus.
- Reservoir - A reservoir for micro-organisms (where the infection comes from) e.g. people, animals, food, contaminated surfaces.
- Portal of exit - The way in which micro-organisms leave the body e.g. coughing, sneezing, diarrhoea, blood.
- Means of transmission - The way in which micro-organisms are transmitted e.g. hands, equipment, airborne, injection, and ingestion.
- Portal of entry - The way in which micro-organisms enter the body e.g. mouth, nose, urinary tract, exposed wounds, broken skin, mucous membranes, needle stick injuries.
- A person at risk - A person's susceptibility to infection is determined by their age, well-being, level of immunity, invasive devices and any medical interventions.

BREAKING THE CHAIN OF INFECTION

To break the chain requires removal of just one of the six links. With good infection prevention and control practice (standard precautions) applied at all times and in all health and social care settings, a link in the chain can be broken which will prevent the spread of infection. Examples of how to break the chain include;

- Hand hygiene
- PPE
- Cover any wounds
- Correct waste management
- Correct laundry Management.
- Good environmental cleaning

