

## **Are Hospitals Too Dirty?**

Deaths linked to hospital infections represent the fourth leading cause of mortality among Americans according to a Chicago Tribune reporter who devoted 18 months to digging up this story.

Furthermore, the report indicated that most of the deaths were preventable. Many health officials have disputed the numbers, but the story is focusing new attention on a growing problem.

Deaths linked to hospital infections represent the fourth leading cause of mortality among Americans, behind heart disease, cancer and strokes. These infections kill more people each year than car accidents, fires and drowning combined.

### **Unwashed Hands**

Tribune reporter Michael J. Berens spent a year and a half investigating the story, which is filled with stunning information. One finding: tens of thousands of lives could have been saved if doctors or nurses simply washed their hands.

"Study after study tells us that only 50 percent make time to wash their hands," Berens told *Good Morning America*. "And there must be time for it — even in a crisis, a patient should be able to expect their doctor to do at least that."

Government data show that about 6 percent, or more than 2 million people admitted to hospitals each year, will pick up some type of infection. Such infections might not be harmful to the average person, but for sick patients who are often too weak to fight them off, they can be deadly.

The Tribune report found that nearly three-quarters of the deadly infections, or about 75,000, were preventable because they were caused by unsanitary facilities, germ-infected instruments, unwashed hands, or other lapses.

### **Sanitary Violations Common**

His investigation revealed that 75 percent of all hospitals have been cited for sanitary violations, Berens said.

"Many of them don't clean rooms between patient admissions," Berens said. "And we're not talking about changing the sheets — we're talking about disinfecting the room. The germs from the last patient will still be evident in the room unless it is properly disinfected."

Proper disinfection means that the disinfectant must remain on the surface of the bedrails, the toilet, the sink and other areas for five to 10 minutes, after which it should be wiped off, Berens said. But minimum wage cleaning staff is hired for the job, and they are often

rushed through the cleaning process, because bed turnover is crucial in the medical marketplace.

In other cases, doctors and nurses wear their scrubs to work, then walk right into the operating room.

"They just don't think about it," Berens said. Plus, some doctors do not wash their hands before surgery because they are wearing gloves, forgetting that they are using their dirty hands to put on those gloves.

**ABCNEWS' Dr. Nancy Snyderman gave the following tips for patients:**

- **Watch Your Doctor, Before You're Admitted.** Does he wash his hands before he touches you, and then again after he writes in your chart? It's an early indication of how you'll be treated in the hospital he's affiliated with, Snyderman said.
- **Check Out the Hospital:** Go to the hospital and look around. If there are paper towels on the floor, and the public bathrooms are dirty, these are good indications that cleanliness is not a priority.
- **Ask Staff to Wash Their Hands:** You are well within your rights to ask the people treating you to wash their hands. It won't make you popular, but it will help you stay healthy.

Remember: Most of the germs that are causing the deaths are the same ones that we all fight off every day. But people in the hospital must be treated as special — they are susceptible, and often unable to fight back. ■