

After your splenectomy

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If, after reading this leaflet you have any further questions, please contact your doctor or discharge ward on:

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After your splenectomy

What does the spleen do?

Although the spleen is not essential to life, it does filter out certain harmful organisms from the blood stream.

Now that your spleen has been removed you are at increased risk of developing infection.

The risks of infection

The risk of infection is the highest within the first 2 years after splenectomy but some patients have developed infection many years after the removal of their spleen.

The risk is also higher in children, but is still very small.

What types of infection?

The types of infection you are at risk of are:

Septicaemia: This occurs when bacteria multiply in the blood.

Symptoms include flu-like illness with fever, sweats and shivers.

Pneumonia: This occurs when bacteria infect the lungs.

Symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath.

Malaria & Babesiosis: Only travellers visiting countries where these diseases occur need worry about these two infections.

Space for your notes

You must also take every precaution to avoid mosquito bites e.g. use insect repellent, screens and mosquito nets.

Another infection which you are at increased risk of is Babesiosis. This infection is carried by ticks living in scrub and woodland in Eastern Europe, e.g. the former Yugoslavia and parts of New England, USA. If you travel to these areas, avoid locations where infected ticks are found (e.g. scrub and woodland) and wear protective clothing to prevent tick attachment.

If in doubt, consult your doctor who will advise you on which countries are likely to be a problem for you

For most people in the UK, the only risks are those of septicaemia and pneumonia.

How can the risks of infection be reduced?

- Take antibiotics every day.
- Get vaccinated against infection.
- Carry a Medic-Alert card or bracelet.
- Consult your doctor if you get a fever.
- Seek urgent treatment for animal bites.
- Take extra precautions when travelling abroad.

To reduce the risks of infection:

Take antibiotics everyday

The antibiotic usually chosen is:

- Penicillin V 500mg by mouth once daily OR

If you are allergic to penicillin the doctor will prescribe:

- Erythromycin 500mg by mouth twice daily.

The antibiotic should be taken for the rest of your life.

After a few years some people prefer to stop taking daily antibiotics and just keep a stock of antibiotics to treat fever, until they can get to the doctor. However, you must discuss with your doctor before you stop taking your daily antibiotics.

Vaccination

Make sure you have received all your routine immunisations. In addition to routine immunisations, there are also some extra immunisations people without a functioning spleen should have to help prevent infections to which you are particularly vulnerable. These vaccines are:

- Pneumococcal (a booster dose is also needed every 5 years)
- Haemophilus influenzae type b/meningococcal C
- Meningococcal B
- Meningococcal ACWY (Men ACWY)
- Influenza (every year)

Talk to your doctor or nurse to get more information and to arrange these immunisations.

Medic-Alert

You should carry a **splenectomy card** which warns any doctor that you are increased risk of infection, in case you are too ill to tell the doctor yourself. These are available from DH Health & Social Care Publications Orderline PO Box 777 London SE1 6XH: Tel. 0300 123 1002

https://www.orderline.dh.gov.uk/ecom_dh/public/saleproduct.jsf?catalogueCode=407841

You should also carry a Medic-Alert bracelet or locket.

For more information on Medic-Alert products contact the Medic Alert Foundation <https://www.medicalert.org.uk/> or telephone **01908 951045** or write to Medic Alert Foundation, 327-329 Witan Court, Upper Fourth Street.

What to do if you develop a fever

Even though the antibiotics and vaccine will protect you to a great extent, breakthrough infection can still occur.

You should be aware of this and consult your doctor immediately if you develop a high temperature.

Be sure to remind him/her that you have had a splenectomy.

Animal bites

If you are bitten by an animal e.g. dog you should obtain a 5 day course of co-amoxiclav (or erythromycin for penicillin allergic patients) from your doctor.

If you travel abroad

In some countries e.g. Spain, there are pneumococcus bacteria which may be resistant to penicillin. You should continue to take your usual antibiotics throughout your stay and be **aware of local medical facilities** so that you know where to obtain treatment in the event of an emergency.

You are more at risk of malaria. Therefore you should avoid travel to areas where there is malaria, unless this is absolutely necessary.

If you do travel to malarious area you must take your antimalarial tablets exactly as instructed.