

Monday 20 March 2017

Risk of *Mycobacterium chimaera* infection associated with heater cooler units

Questions and Answers

Who is being contacted?

Patients who underwent heart valve replacement or valve repair surgery since 1 January 2013 are being contacted by letter. Patients who have had other types of open heart surgery have a minimal risk of contracting this infection will not be sent a letter.

Two groups of patients (patients who have undergone heart/lung transplant and patients who have had non valve-related congenital heart disease repair) will not be included in the patient notification exercise and will not receive letters. Instead, these patients will be followed up by their clinical team and receive information as part of their hospital clinical follow up at their next appointment.

What organisations are involved in this patient notification exercise?

Health Protection Scotland has worked with NHS England, Public Health England, the Medicine and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), other devolved nations and private providers on this patient notification exercise.

What are heater cooler units?

Heater cooler units are devices used to heat and cool the blood during some types of open heart surgery. The device is essential for carrying out these types of heart surgery.

What is NHS Scotland doing to reduce the risk of further infections?

The device used to heat and cool the blood is essential for some types of surgery. However, the risk of infection is very low and much lower than the risks involved in not having surgical treatment. The low risk of infection is an issue that has affected this type of machine across the world and not just the UK.

Following the identification of this possible risk, hospitals that undertake heart surgery have put in place extra precautions to reduce the chances of *Mycobacterium chimaera* infection. All cardiothoracic centres have now increased their cleaning and disinfection procedures for the heater cooler units and are testing their devices for evidence of growth of micro-organisms.

No cases of the infection have been found in patients who have had open heart surgery since these measures were put in place.

Is this limited to the UK?

No, this is a world-wide issue. However, in Scotland there are no known cases of this infection.

What are the symptoms to look out for?

Symptoms of an infection with these bacteria have many of the same features of other illnesses.

Symptoms of this infection are:

- unexplained fevers or night sweats (waking up with bed sheets showing signs of sweating)
- unexplained weight loss
- increasing shortness of breath
- joint or muscle pain
- nausea or vomiting
- abdominal pain
- abnormal levels of fatigue or pain
- redness, pain, heat or pus around the surgical site.

Can one person give this infection to another?

This infection cannot be spread from person-to-person.

Is testing being offered?

No, it is not possible to be tested to see if you will develop symptoms in the future. The symptoms of this infection can take up to five years to appear and so it is important for patients to be aware of the symptoms of a *Mycobacterium chimaera* infection and to see their GP if they develop any of these. Treatments for this infection are available.

Once the symptoms develop how do they test for *Mycobacterium chimaera* infection?

In addition to standard investigations, a blood test for *Mycobacterium chimaera* is taken. Other samples may also be taken depending upon the symptoms.

What are the treatments for the infection?

Treatment may involve further surgery and the long-term use of antibiotics. If you're diagnosed with the infection, infection and heart specialists will work together to determine the most appropriate treatment after carrying out tests.

Is this curable?

Early treatment for *Mycobacterium chimaera* offers the best chance of cure. Following surgery, combinations of antibiotics have to be taken for a long time.

How can I find out more?

Information for anyone who is concerned about their risk is advised to call NHS 24 on 0800 028 2836. It is free to call from landlines and mobiles and is available between 8am and 10pm, seven days a week. Alternatively, please go to [NHS Inform](#).

- For patients in England – please visit the [NHS Choices website](#), or to call NHS 111 for information.
- For patients in Wales – please call 0800 035 2877.
- For patients in Northern Ireland – please call **0289 0630500**. It is active between 10am – 6pm on Tuesday 21 March then 9am - 6pm from Wed 22 to Fri 24 March 2017.