

Hospital infections a deadly threat -

Hospital-acquired infections are among the biggest public health threats in America and they're on the rise. The often drug-resistant germs kill more than twice as many people as traffic accidents and cost an estimated \$4.5 billion a year.

SHARON PAULEY can barely muster the energy for a walk with her son John.

Two and a half years ago Pauley was a bundle of energy — an avid golfer. But then she got an infection in her chest bones during heart surgery. That one hospital stay has led to 16 more and every day John must change the dressings on the tube his mother needs for massive doses of antibiotics.

“It’s just a nightmare to go through these procedures time after time,” Sharon said.

Pauley is only one victim of one of the biggest causes of disease and death in this country.

MAJOR CAUSE OF DEATH

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates one in 20 people admitted to the hospital gets an infection there. That adds up to 2 million infections a year — and 90,000 deaths, making it the fourth leading cause of death in the United States.

But a report by the Chicago Tribune that analyzed records from 75 federal and state agencies, as well as internal hospital files, patient databases and court cases, found that about 103,000 deaths were linked to hospital infections in 2000 — 14 percent higher than the CDC’s numbers. According to the report, since 1995, more than 75 percent of all hospitals have been cited for serious cleanliness and sanitation violations

PREVENTING INFECTIONS

CDC officials said they believe most hospital infections are preventable, but the agency has not arrived at a precise number.

So what can be done about it? Many of the necessary precautions are well-known: frequent hand-washing, wearing protective gowns and constantly taking cultures to watch for antibiotic-resistant germs. More than 70 percent of the hospital-acquired infections are resistant to at least one antibiotic.

The CDC said it is such a danger that patients need to ask about a hospital’s infection control practices.

“They need to ask their physicians and their nurses to follow all the recommend guidelines. It’s OK to ask a physician or remind a physician to wash their hands,” said the CDC’s Dr. Steven Soloman.

The American Hospital Association said the last decade of unprecedented cost-cutting and financial instability has impacted all areas of hospital care.

“It’s had an effect on infection control and it’s had an effect on our ability to recruit and retain workers. It’s had an effect on our ability to invest in new and updated equipment as much as we would like to,” said Rick Wade, spokesman for the AHA. Cal Warriner, a malpractice attorney, agrees: “They’re squeezed so tightly by budget constraints that this is one of the places where patient care suffers. And frankly if you think about it for a minute, it costs a lot of money to prevent infections and it is not a revenue-generating concept or activity.”

But it is a necessity, many experts agree, to stem an epidemic of frightening proportions.

NBC Chief Science Correspondent Robert Bazell and Reuters contributed to this story.