FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FOR MEMORIAL HERMANN HEALTH SYSTEM PATIENTS

What is the issue/situation?
The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has notified all hospitals of a potential exposure to bacteria in patients who have undergone open heart/valve surgery or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (“ECMO”) (collectively referred to as “cardiac surgery”). The bacteria have been linked to heater-cooler devices used during cardiac surgery procedures.

What type of bacteria is involved?
The bacterium is called Non-Tuberculous Mycobacteria, or NTM. It grows slowly and is commonly found in soil and water, including tap water. It is usually not harmful to humans, and rarely has caused infections in patients with weakened immune systems. However, patients who have had open heart/valve surgery or ECMO may have become exposed to these bacteria during the cardiac surgery, and could be at risk of infection.

What is a heater-cooler device and how might it be related to this problem?
A heater-cooler device is used during open heart/valve surgeries and ECMO to warm or cool a patient’s blood as part of their usual surgical care. It is never in direct contact with the patient or the patient’s blood. There is a water reservoir inside the device. NTM can grow in the water in heater-cooler devices. During use, some of the water evaporates and enters the air in the operating room. It is believed that the NTM bacteria may be put in to the air by the heater-cooler device, and can then possibly enter the patient’s open chest during the procedure.

Why are we contacting patients?
The CDC and the Food and Drug Administration (“FDA”) have recommended that hospitals who use these heater-cooler devices identify and notify patients who underwent cardiac surgery. It is possible that these patients may have been exposed to the bacteria during cardiac surgery.

Has this happened at any hospitals?
There have been multiple cases documented in the United States and Europe. In the United States, federal health authorities, including the CDC and FDA have issued health advisories to hospitals to help them prevent and detect these infections.

What are my chances of having this infection?
The estimated risk of infection is less than 1%.

What are the symptoms of an NTM infection?
According to the CDC, symptoms may include those associated with an unexplained infection, including the following:
- Redness, heat, or purulent discharge at the surgical site;
- Fatigue;
- Unexplained fever;
- Pain;
- Night sweats;
• Muscle aches;
• Unexplained weight loss;
• Abdominal pain;
• Nausea; and/or
• Vomiting.

These symptoms are not specific for NTM and can be due to many other causes, but NTM should be considered if you had possible exposure from open heart/valve surgery or ECMO. NTM infection may take a long time to develop after potential exposure – from a few weeks up to four years. Therefore, those who may have been exposed to NTM should continue to look for symptoms and see their doctor for further evaluation if any develop.

**Is this infection treatable?**
Yes, there are effective antibiotic treatments available for this infection.

**If I have been exposed or develop an NTM infection, is my family at risk of getting the infection?**
No. This bacterium cannot be spread by contact with those who have been exposed to this infection.

**Can I find out whether I am infected?**
If you do not have symptoms, you do not require testing. The bacterium grows slowly and it can take several months or years for symptoms of infection to develop. If you have or develop symptoms, it is important for your physician to know in order to arrange testing.

**What if I had another type of heart surgery?**
Patients who had other, less invasive heart procedure – such as stents, pacemakers, defibrillators, and ablations – or minimally invasive cardiac surgery procedures such as a transcatheter aortic valve replacement (TAVR) are not at risk because the heater-cooler device is not used for these procedures.

**What action is Memorial Hermann taking to protect patients?**
Memorial Hermann has adhered to manufacturer guidelines for disinfecting and maintaining these heater-cooler devices. After the CDC issued its advisory with recommendations for more stringent disinfection practices, Memorial Hermann also implemented those recommendations. Memorial Hermann has been strictly adhering to the cleaning and disinfection instructions.

In addition to notifying our patients, we have created a toll-free hotline (1-855-338-5888) to provide our patients with additional information.