

Adverse Health Events Factsheet:

Retained Objects

Background

The Minnesota Department of Health collects information about 27 different kinds of adverse health events, including surgery on the wrong person or body part, falls linked with a death, and serious bed sores. Retained objects are one of the most common adverse events. Since 2003, 124 retained objects have been reported.

What is a retained object?

A retained object is something that is left in a patient's body after surgery, delivery of a baby, or another procedure. Small sponges and clamps are the most common retained objects. In some cases, the retained object is a small piece of tubing or other equipment that has broken off in the body.

Sometimes retained objects are discovered right away, before the person leaves the operating room. Other times they are found later if a patient has pain or problems healing.

Can I be hurt by a retained object?

In most cases, there is no lasting harm to the patient. Often, the object can be removed right away, without another surgery. Sometimes, a surgical cut needs to be opened again to take the object out. Some small objects might be left in the body if they won't cause health problems.

How do objects get left behind?

During surgery, doctors and nurses might use dozens or even hundreds of sponges, clamps, tubes, wires, and other objects. Every hospital and surgical center has rules for counting these things. They count how many sponges, clamps, and other supplies are used, and then they count

again after the surgery to make sure that all of them have been taken out.

Sometimes, that count is wrong. Certain things, like clamps or wires, might not have been on the list of things to count. An interruption can also make people lose track of the count. It's usually not one person's fault when this happens. Usually, it is because there was a problem with a system that was supposed to prevent objects from being left behind.

What should hospitals and surgical centers do to prevent retained objects?

There are many ways to prevent clamps and sponges from being left behind after surgery. Every hospital and surgical center should:

- Have rules to require counting objects during and after surgery
- Make sure the rules are followed every time doctors or nurses go into a patient's body
- Make sure that there is a checklist or other documents to show that objects were counted

Where can I learn more?

To learn more about what specific hospitals and surgical centers are doing to prevent retained objects, visit the MDH Web site at www.health.state.mn.us/patientsafety.

Or, contact:

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