Strategies to Prevent Medical Errors
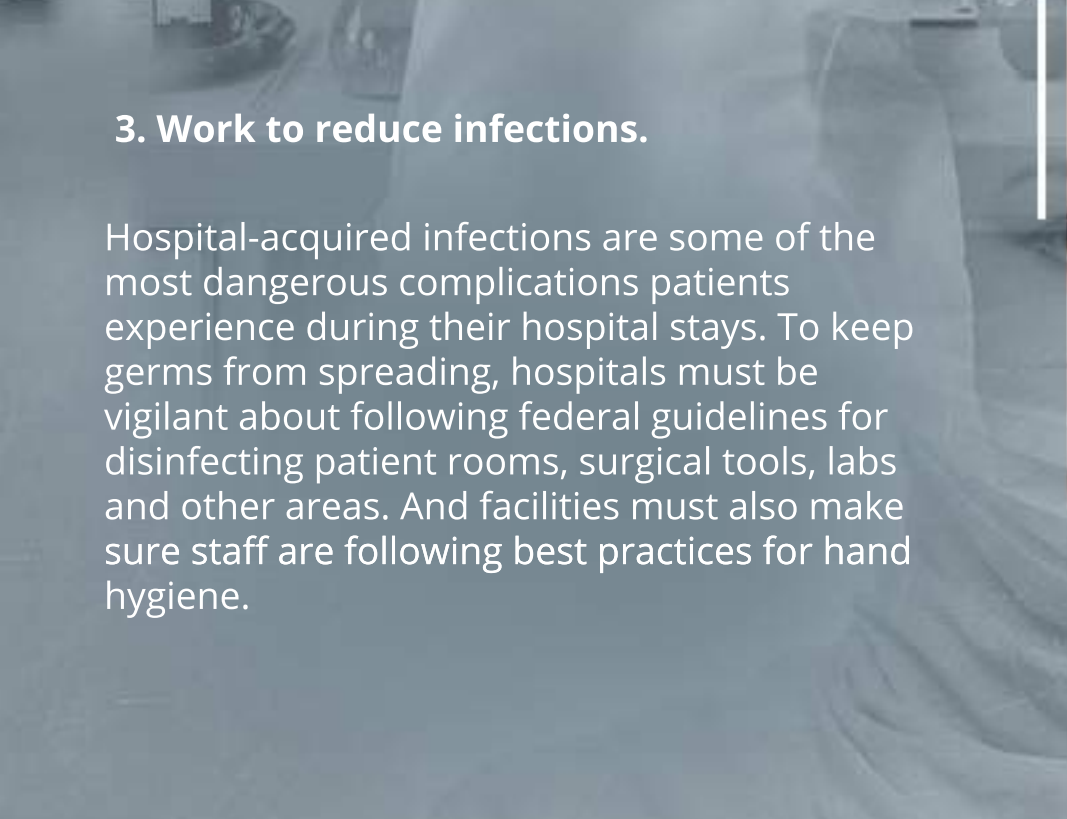
1. Adopt a structure for handoff conversations.

One of the biggest contributors to serious medical errors is miscommunication among staff during shift changes. According to the Joint Commission, it causes the majority of serious injuries and deaths from medical errors. Using checklists and other tools to make sure nothing's missed during handoff conversations is crucial to preventing mistakes.

2. Get pharmacists more directly involved in patient treatment.

It's common for doctors and nurses to make the rounds with patients together. Author/lawyer James Lieber proposes adding pharmacists into the mix. That way, doctors can get direct information about how different drugs may adversely affect patients' conditions – and which ones they should prescribe instead. Pharmacists may also be able to more easily catch mistakes involving medication, such as ordering the wrong dosage or drug for a patient.

3. Work to reduce infections.

Hospital-acquired infections are some of the most dangerous complications patients experience during their hospital stays. To keep germs from spreading, hospitals must be vigilant about following federal guidelines for disinfecting patient rooms, surgical tools, labs and other areas. And facilities must also make sure staff are following best practices for hand hygiene.

4. Avoid diagnostic error.

Mistakes with diagnoses don't just include the wrong diagnosis. Delayed diagnoses, overdiagnosing and partial diagnoses also count. If each person uses his or her expertise effectively, and isn't afraid to speak up if he or she sees any inconsistencies, diagnoses will be more accurate.

5. Make electronic health records (EHR) systems more interoperable.

Meaningful use requirements will soon change, and they'll place a bigger focus on ensuring EHR systems from different providers and facilities can communicate with each other to share key health information about patients easily. Hospitals need to work closely with their EHR vendors and IT staff to make sure their system can be updated to meet those requirements down the line.