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Nursing Strategies for Preventing Complications Associated with Surgical Drains in Postoperative Patients

Amal Hassan Ebrahim Abuallatifah[1], Sarah Saud Reshidi[2], Rawabi Lafi Bughayth Alanazi[3], Sabah Muteb Alharbi[4], Manar Bader Faraj Bin Bakheet[5], Turkiah Hussain Abdullah Alsharif[6], Suad Rashed Zuqm Alshammari[7], Alrasheedi, Marzouqah Awadh A[8], Erhab Hussain Hassan Zalah[9], Maali Mukhaylif N Alruwaili[10]

[1] Senior Nurse — Al-Sharfiah Primary Health Care Center – Ministry of Health – Jeddah – Makkah Region – Saudi Arabia. Email: aaboallatifah@moh.gov.sa
[2] Senior Nursing Specialist – Supply Chain — Hail Health Cluster – Ministry of Health – Hail – Hail Region – Saudi Arabia. Email: rsreshidi@moh.gov.sa
[3] Nursing Specialist — Mental Health Hospital – Al Jouf Health Cluster – Ministry of Health – Al Qurayyat – Al Jouf Region – Saudi Arabia. Email: rawabila@moh.gov.sa
[4] Nursing Specialist — King Salman Medical City – Madinah Health Cluster – Ministry of Health – Madinah – Madinah Region – Saudi Arabia.
Email: Sabah75.alharbi@gmail.com
[5] Nursing Specialist — Hail Health Cluster – Ministry of Health – Hail – Hail Region – Saudi Arabia. Email: mbinbakheet@moh.gov.sa
[6] Nursing Technician — Shobaa Primary Health Care Center – Asir Health Cluster – Ministry of Health – Khamis Mushait – Asir Region – Saudi Arabia.
Email: thsharif@moh.gov.sa
[7] Nursing Specialist — King Abdulaziz Specialist Hospital – Al Jouf Health Cluster – Ministry of Health – Sakaka – Al Jouf Region – Saudi Arabia.
Email: Suralshammari@moh.gov.sa
[8] Sufait Primary Health Care Center — Hail Health Cluster – Ministry of Health – Al-Ha'it – Hail Region – Saudi Arabia. Email: marzouqahaa@moh.gov.sa
[9] Nursing Specialist — Al Jahw Primary Health Care Center – Jazan Health Cluster – Ministry of Health – Jazan – Jazan Region – Saudi Arabia.
Email: Erhab111223@gmail.com
[10] Nursing Specialist — Maternity and Children Hospital – Al Jouf Health Cluster – Ministry of Health – Sakaka – Al Jouf Region – Saudi Arabia.
Email: Malrowilly@moh.gov.sa

ABSTRACT: Surgical drains are widely used in postoperative patients to evacuate accumulated blood, serous fluid, lymphatic secretions, bile, and other biological fluids from surgical sites and body cavities. Although these devices play an important role in reducing postoperative fluid collections, monitoring potential complications, and supporting surgical recovery, their presence may also introduce considerable risks, including surgical site infections, drain obstruction, accidental displacement, bleeding, tissue injury, fluid and electrolyte disturbances, and delayed wound healing. The prevention of these complications requires comprehensive nursing care based on appropriate assessment, strict

infection prevention practices, continuous monitoring, accurate documentation, and timely communication with the multidisciplinary healthcare team. Nurses have a central responsibility in maintaining drain functionality, assessing drainage characteristics, protecting the insertion site, identifying early warning signs, and educating patients and caregivers about safe drain management. Evidence-based nursing interventions should be individualized according to the type of surgical procedure, the characteristics of the drainage system, the patient's clinical condition, and the expected postoperative recovery process. Particular attention should be directed toward maintaining closed drainage systems, preventing unnecessary manipulation, applying aseptic non-touch techniques, ensuring appropriate positioning and fixation, and evaluating the ongoing necessity of each drain. Furthermore, structured monitoring protocols and standardized documentation can improve early recognition of abnormalities and facilitate timely clinical interventions. Patient education and discharge planning are equally important, particularly for individuals discharged with indwelling drains who require ongoing management at home. Implementing systematic and individualized nursing strategies can reduce preventable drain-related complications, promote wound healing, improve patient comfort, and contribute to safer postoperative outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Surgical drainage is an established component of postoperative management in several surgical specialties, including general surgery, orthopedic surgery, plastic and reconstructive surgery, cardiovascular surgery, neurosurgery, thoracic surgery, and gynecological surgery. Surgical drains are medical devices inserted during or following surgical procedures to facilitate the evacuation of accumulated fluids, reduce the formation of postoperative collections, and provide information about the patient's postoperative condition. Depending on the nature of the operation, these devices may be used to remove blood, serous fluid, lymph, pus, bile, pancreatic secretions, or other fluids that may accumulate within surgical cavities or dissected tissue spaces [1]. Their clinical importance is related not only to fluid evacuation but also to their potential diagnostic function, as changes in drainage volume and characteristics may indicate postoperative hemorrhage, anastomotic leakage, infection, or other complications requiring immediate assessment. Nevertheless, the routine application of surgical drains has become increasingly questioned because their benefits are procedure-dependent and their presence may introduce additional risks. Therefore, appropriate drain selection, maintenance, and removal require careful clinical judgment and coordinated postoperative nursing management [1,2].

The fundamental physiological rationale for surgical drainage involves the prevention or management of fluid accumulation within anatomical spaces created or affected by surgery. Following tissue dissection and surgical manipulation, inflammatory responses increase vascular permeability, resulting in the movement of fluid and proteins into surrounding tissues. Disruption of small blood vessels and lymphatic channels may further contribute to postoperative collections, including hematomas, seromas, and lymphoceles [2]. These collections can produce tissue tension, discomfort, impaired wound approximation, and delayed healing. In selected clinical circumstances, accumulated fluid may also become infected or interfere with the function of adjacent structures. Surgical drains can facilitate the evacuation of these fluids, reduce dead-space accumulation, and allow healthcare professionals to monitor postoperative fluid production. However, the effectiveness of drainage depends on appropriate indications, anatomical positioning, device characteristics, and continuous maintenance of drain patency. A drain that is incorrectly positioned, obstructed, contaminated, or maintained longer than clinically necessary may provide limited therapeutic benefit while increasing the possibility of complications [1,3].

The development of surgical drainage systems has resulted in several device designs with different mechanisms of action and clinical applications. Traditional open drains, including Penrose drains, depend primarily on gravity and capillary action to facilitate fluid movement from the operative site. In contrast, closed drainage systems collect fluid within a sealed reservoir, reducing direct environmental exposure and allowing more accurate measurement of drainage output [4]. Active drainage systems generate negative pressure through a compressed reservoir or suction apparatus, whereas passive systems depend on gravity, pressure differences, or capillary mechanisms. Commonly used closed suction devices include Jackson-Pratt and Hemovac drains, which are frequently employed following procedures involving extensive tissue dissection. The selection of a

particular system depends on the expected drainage volume, anatomical location, surgical procedure, and the clinical requirements of the patient. Nurses must understand these differences because each device requires specific assessment, emptying, fixation, and maintenance procedures [1,4].

Despite their therapeutic advantages, surgical drains represent potential pathways for microbial contamination and may contribute to the development of surgical site infections. The insertion site provides a possible route through which microorganisms can enter deeper tissues, particularly when the surrounding dressing becomes wet, loose, or contaminated. Repeated manipulation of drainage tubing, unnecessary disconnection of closed systems, inadequate hand hygiene, and improper handling of collection reservoirs can increase opportunities for contamination [5]. Furthermore, prolonged drain retention may expose the patient to an extended period of device-related infection risk. The relationship between surgical drains and postoperative infection is complex, however, because the underlying surgical procedure, patient characteristics, wound contamination, and duration of hospitalization may also influence infection outcomes. Evidence suggests that open drainage systems may carry greater contamination concerns than appropriately maintained closed systems, although the presence of a closed-suction drain does not eliminate infection risk. Consequently, nurses should regard drain care as an integral component of surgical site infection prevention rather than as an isolated technical procedure [5,6].

Surgical site infections are among the most clinically important complications associated with postoperative care because they can result in prolonged hospitalization, repeated surgical interventions, increased antimicrobial exposure, additional healthcare costs, and substantial patient discomfort. The presence of an indwelling surgical drain requires particular attention to infection prevention because microorganisms may colonize the device or surrounding tissues. The World Health Organization emphasizes the importance of evidence-based infection prevention throughout the preoperative, intraoperative, and postoperative periods [7]. Its recommendations also address antimicrobial prophylaxis in patients with surgical drains, indicating that antibiotics should not be continued solely because a wound drain remains in place. Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations emphasize appropriate antimicrobial prophylaxis and postoperative infection prevention practices. These recommendations highlight that the prevention of drain-related infection depends on comprehensive infection control measures rather than unnecessary antibiotic administration [7,8].

In addition to infection, mechanical complications represent another important category of drain-related adverse events. Drainage tubing may become compressed, kinked, twisted, blocked by blood clots, or obstructed by thick secretions. Such problems can interfere with fluid evacuation and lead to accumulation within the operative site. Accidental displacement may result in partial or complete loss of drainage function, leakage around the insertion site, or contamination of the wound [4]. In certain circumstances, excessive traction may cause tissue trauma, bleeding, discomfort, or disruption of the surgical wound. Drain fracture and retained fragments, although less common, may lead to serious complications, including chronic pain, abscess formation, fistula development, and the need for additional invasive procedures. These complications demonstrate the importance of regular mechanical inspection, secure fixation, careful patient mobilization, and standardized drain removal procedures [4].

The nursing role in preventing these complications extends throughout the entire postoperative period, beginning immediately after the patient returns from the operating room and continuing until the drain is removed and the insertion site has been appropriately assessed. Nurses are responsible for confirming the prescribed drainage system, identifying the insertion site and drainage route, assessing the surrounding skin, checking the tubing for obstruction, and ensuring that the collection reservoir is functioning correctly [4]. Initial postoperative assessment should include the amount and characteristics of the drainage, the condition of the surgical dressing, the patient's vital signs, pain level, and overall clinical stability. These observations establish a baseline against which subsequent changes can be evaluated. Accurate baseline documentation is particularly important because sudden changes in drainage output may provide early evidence of hemorrhage, fluid leakage, or other postoperative complications [10].

Continuous monitoring of drainage characteristics is essential because the volume, color, consistency, and odor of collected fluid may provide important clinical information. Fresh blood, unexpectedly increasing output, sudden cessation of previously consistent drainage, cloudy fluid, purulent material, or foul-smelling discharge should prompt further assessment. For example, a sudden increase in bright-red drainage accompanied by tachycardia, hypotension, pallor, or dizziness may indicate postoperative bleeding and requires urgent escalation [2]. Similarly, cloudy or purulent drainage associated with fever, localized erythema, warmth, and increasing tenderness may suggest infection. However, drainage characteristics must always be interpreted in relation to the surgical procedure because expected fluid composition and volume vary considerably between

different operations. Nurses should therefore avoid relying on a single measurement and instead evaluate trends in conjunction with the patient's overall clinical condition [10].

Another important aspect of postoperative drain management is the prevention of unnecessary device manipulation. Repeated squeezing, stripping, flushing, or disconnecting of drainage tubing may cause tissue trauma, alter suction pressure, or introduce contamination when performed without a clear clinical indication. Although some procedures require specific interventions to maintain drain patency, these should follow the manufacturer's instructions, institutional policies, and explicit clinical orders. Nurses should distinguish between routine inspection and interventions that require additional clinical authorization. Maintaining the integrity of the closed drainage system is particularly important because unnecessary disconnection may compromise the protective barrier between the operative site and the external environment. Standardized protocols can help reduce variations in practice and ensure that all healthcare professionals follow consistent drain management procedures [4,5].

Patient safety also depends on the appropriate positioning and fixation of surgical drains. Drainage reservoirs should generally be positioned according to the device design and prescribed drainage mechanism, with gravity-dependent systems maintained below the insertion site when indicated. Tubing should remain free from kinks, compression, and excessive tension, while collection reservoirs should be secured to prevent accidental pulling during repositioning or mobilization. Nurses should assess whether the tubing interferes with patient movement, sleeping, toileting, or rehabilitation activities. Appropriate fixation reduces the risk of accidental displacement and improves patient comfort. In patients with multiple drains, each device should be clearly identified according to its anatomical location and clinical purpose to prevent confusion during assessment and documentation [4,11].

The prevention of drain-related complications becomes particularly important during patient mobilization and rehabilitation. Early mobilization is a fundamental component of modern postoperative recovery, but the presence of drainage devices may create practical challenges. Patients may be reluctant to move because of discomfort or fear of pulling the tubing, while poorly secured drains can become caught in bedding, clothing, or mobility equipment. Nurses should therefore inspect all drainage connections before assisting patients with sitting, standing, walking, or transferring between beds and chairs. Collection devices should be supported appropriately, and tubing should be arranged to permit movement without traction. These measures allow patients to benefit from postoperative mobilization while minimizing the risk of accidental drain displacement or interruption of drainage [11,12].

Furthermore, effective nursing management requires an individualized approach that considers patient-specific risk factors. Advanced age, diabetes mellitus, obesity, malnutrition, smoking, immunosuppression, vascular insufficiency, and impaired wound healing may increase susceptibility to postoperative complications. Patients undergoing extensive procedures or operations involving contaminated tissues may also require more intensive monitoring. In such circumstances, nurses should pay particular attention to insertion-site integrity, drainage patterns, wound appearance, and systemic signs of infection. The patient's cognitive status and ability to understand instructions should also be considered when planning drain education and discharge arrangements. A standardized approach provides consistency, but individualized assessment ensures that nursing interventions address the actual risks and needs of each patient [7,13].

Patient education is another essential component of safe drain management, especially when patients are discharged with indwelling devices. Before discharge, patients and caregivers should understand the purpose of the drain, how to maintain the collection reservoir, how to recognize abnormalities, and when to contact the healthcare team. Education should include hand hygiene, dressing care, safe emptying and measurement of drainage when prescribed, prevention of accidental traction, and appropriate activity precautions. Patients should also be informed that fever, increasing wound redness, worsening pain, foul-smelling drainage, sudden changes in output, leakage, and accidental drain displacement require prompt medical evaluation. Clear written instructions and demonstration of practical skills can improve patient confidence and support continuity of care after hospital discharge [9,14].

The increasing emphasis on evidence-based postoperative care has strengthened the importance of standardized nursing protocols for surgical drain management. International guidelines, surgical infection prevention recommendations, and perioperative nursing literature provide a framework for reducing preventable complications. However, differences in surgical procedures and drainage systems mean that no single protocol is appropriate for every patient. Clinical decisions should therefore combine current evidence, institutional policies, surgical instructions, and ongoing nursing assessment. A systematic approach incorporating appropriate device selection, aseptic maintenance, continuous monitoring, timely escalation, and

clinically indicated removal can improve the safety and effectiveness of postoperative drainage. Within this framework, nurses serve as essential patient safety professionals who identify early abnormalities, coordinate interventions, and promote recovery through comprehensive and continuous care [5,7,8].

Classification and Types of Surgical Drains

Surgical drains can be classified according to their mechanism of action, pressure characteristics, and whether the drainage system remains open or closed. Understanding these classifications is essential for nurses because the type of drain determines the appropriate maintenance technique, monitoring requirements, and potential complications. The two major categories are open and closed drainage systems. Open drains allow fluid to pass directly from the surgical site onto an external dressing or into a drainage receptacle, whereas closed systems collect fluid within a sealed reservoir. Closed systems are generally preferred when clinically appropriate because they facilitate measurement of drainage output and reduce direct exposure of the drainage pathway to the surrounding environment. Active drainage systems use negative pressure to facilitate fluid removal, while passive systems depend on gravity, capillary action, or pressure gradients. Selection should be based on surgical requirements rather than convenience alone [1,2,3].

Table 1. Classification of commonly used surgical drains and their nursing considerations [1,3,4].

Type of drain	Mechanism and characteristics	Common clinical applications	Important nursing considerations
Penrose drain	Open, passive drainage through gravity and capillary action	Superficial wounds and selected infected cavities	Monitor dressing saturation, leakage, and surrounding skin integrity
Jackson-Pratt drain	Closed, active, low-pressure suction system	Breast, abdominal, and plastic surgery	Maintain reservoir compression, measure output, and inspect tubing
Hemovac drain	Closed, active suction system with a larger collection reservoir	Orthopedic and extensive surgical procedures	Monitor suction function, drainage volume, and reservoir capacity
Redivac drain	Closed, high-vacuum drainage system	Orthopedic and general surgical procedures	Ensure secure connections and appropriate reservoir function
Blake drain	Flexible silicone drain with channels that facilitate fluid movement	Plastic, abdominal, and cardiovascular surgery	Assess patency, fixation, and the characteristics of collected fluid
T-tube	External drainage of bile through a tube positioned within the biliary tract	Selected biliary procedures	Monitor bile output, prevent kinking, and follow specific surgical orders
Chest drain	Drainage of air, blood, or fluid from the pleural cavity through an underwater seal or specialized system	Thoracic surgery and selected cardiopulmonary conditions	Maintain prescribed system position, assess respiratory status, and monitor air leaks

Open Drainage Systems

Open drainage systems are characterized by the absence of a completely sealed collection reservoir. Fluid passes from the operative site through the drain and is collected using external dressings or other receptacles. Penrose drains are among the most recognized examples and may be used in selected superficial wounds or infected cavities. Their relatively simple structure makes them easy to apply, but their open configuration increases the importance of frequent dressing assessment and careful infection prevention. Nurses should observe the amount of fluid absorbed by the dressing, inspect the surrounding skin for maceration, and assess for increasing redness, tenderness, or purulent discharge. Dressings should be changed according to clinical requirements and institutional protocols, particularly when they become saturated, contaminated, or detached. The

insertion site should be protected from unnecessary environmental exposure, and any unexpected increase in leakage should be communicated to the responsible surgical team [1,3,5].

Closed Drainage Systems

Closed drainage systems collect postoperative fluids within a sealed reservoir connected to the surgical site through flexible tubing. Examples include Jackson-Pratt, Hemovac, and Redivac devices. Their principal advantages include the ability to quantify drainage output, facilitate observation of fluid characteristics, and reduce direct exposure of the drainage pathway to external contamination. Nevertheless, closed systems require continuous assessment because leakage, disconnection, loss of suction, or obstruction can compromise their function. Nurses should inspect all connections, verify the integrity of the reservoir, and ensure that the device remains securely positioned. The collection reservoir should be emptied before excessive filling interferes with its function, and measurements should be recorded accurately. Whenever a system becomes disconnected or its integrity is compromised, the nurse should follow institutional procedures and promptly inform the responsible healthcare professional [2,4,6].

Active and Passive Drainage Mechanisms

Active drainage systems use negative pressure to facilitate the movement of fluid away from the surgical site, whereas passive systems depend on gravity, capillary action, or pressure gradients. Active suction drainage can be particularly useful when fluid accumulation is expected following extensive tissue dissection. However, excessive or inappropriate suction may contribute to tissue irritation, bleeding, or damage to surrounding structures in susceptible patients. Passive systems may be appropriate in situations where gentle drainage is preferred or where suction is not clinically indicated. Nursing assessment should therefore include confirmation of the prescribed drainage mechanism and evaluation of whether the system is functioning as intended. Nurses should not independently increase suction pressure, alter device settings, or introduce alternative drainage techniques without appropriate clinical authorization [3,4].

Common Complications Associated with Surgical Drains

Surgical drains can be associated with a range of postoperative complications that may affect wound healing, patient comfort, and overall clinical outcomes. These complications can be classified into infectious, mechanical, bleeding-related, tissue-related, and fluid-related problems. Their occurrence depends on several interacting factors, including the type and location of the drain, the duration of placement, the characteristics of the surgical procedure, patient comorbidities, and the quality of postoperative management. Early recognition is particularly important because relatively minor abnormalities, such as increasing leakage or reduced drainage output, may represent the initial manifestation of a more significant problem. Nurses should therefore combine direct device assessment with wound examination, vital-sign monitoring, and evaluation of the patient's general condition [2,6,9].

Surgical Site Infection and Drain-Related Infection

Surgical site infection is one of the most clinically significant complications in postoperative patients because it may involve superficial tissues, deeper incisional structures, or organs and body spaces affected by the surgical procedure. A drain may become colonized by microorganisms or provide a potential route for contamination when the insertion site or drainage connections are inadequately protected. Clinical manifestations may include localized erythema, swelling, increased warmth, tenderness, purulent discharge, and unpleasant odor. Systemic manifestations, including fever, tachycardia, and deterioration in the patient's general condition, may indicate more extensive infection. The presence of a drain should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of infection; rather, nurses should evaluate the entire clinical picture and communicate concerning findings promptly. Evidence-based infection prevention recommendations emphasize appropriate hand hygiene, aseptic technique, wound protection, and avoidance of unnecessary manipulation of drainage systems [7,8,13,14].

Drain Obstruction and Inadequate Fluid Evacuation

Drain obstruction occurs when the movement of fluid through the tubing becomes restricted or completely interrupted. Common contributing factors include blood clots, thick secretions, fibrin deposits, compression, tubing kinking, and incorrect positioning. Obstruction may lead to fluid accumulation within the operative cavity, resulting in swelling, pain, wound tension, or the formation of a seroma or hematoma. A sudden reduction or cessation of drainage should therefore be interpreted cautiously, particularly when accompanied by increasing wound swelling or discomfort. Nurses should inspect the entire

external drainage pathway, assess the reservoir, and identify visible kinks or compression. If obstruction is suspected, the responsible surgical team should be informed. Flushing, stripping, or other methods of restoring patency should only be performed when specifically indicated and permitted by the device instructions and institutional protocol [3,4,10].

Accidental Displacement and Drain Dislodgement

Accidental drain displacement may occur during patient repositioning, mobilization, dressing changes, or routine activities. Excessive traction, inadequate fixation, confusion involving multiple drainage devices, and patient attempts to adjust the tubing may contribute to this complication. Partial displacement may alter the position of drainage openings and reduce the effectiveness of fluid evacuation, while complete dislodgement may leave the operative site without its intended drainage mechanism. Nurses should inspect the external length and fixation of the tubing, assess the insertion site, and compare the current position with the documented baseline. If displacement is suspected, the drain should not be pushed back into the wound. The site should be protected with an appropriate sterile dressing, and the surgical team should be notified immediately. Any decision regarding replacement or further intervention should be made by the responsible clinician [4,11].

Bleeding and Hemorrhagic Complications

Although surgical drains are frequently used to evacuate postoperative blood, unexpectedly increasing bloody drainage may indicate ongoing hemorrhage. This complication is particularly important during the early postoperative period, when changes in hemodynamic status may develop rapidly. Nurses should assess the volume and color of the drainage, observe the rate of reservoir filling, and evaluate the surgical dressing for additional bleeding. Vital signs should be monitored for tachycardia, hypotension, and other signs of circulatory compromise. Pallor, dizziness, weakness, altered consciousness, and increasing abdominal or wound swelling may provide further evidence of significant blood loss. Sudden increases in bright-red drainage or rapidly filling reservoirs require immediate clinical escalation rather than routine documentation alone. The nurse should maintain close observation and prepare for further assessment and intervention according to the patient's condition and institutional emergency procedures [3,4].

Tissue Trauma, Erosion, and Skin Damage

Drainage devices may cause localized tissue injury when excessive tension, inappropriate positioning, or prolonged pressure affects the insertion site or adjacent structures. Rigid tubing, poorly secured devices, and repeated movement may produce friction, irritation, and skin breakdown. Continuous leakage can also expose surrounding skin to moisture and drainage materials, contributing to maceration and inflammation. In patients with fragile skin, diabetes, impaired circulation, or poor nutritional status, even relatively minor tissue damage may progress into more significant wound complications. Nurses should inspect the skin surrounding the insertion site during routine assessments and ensure that the tubing does not exert unnecessary pressure. Appropriate fixation, protective dressings, and timely management of leakage can reduce the likelihood of these complications. Persistent pain, skin discoloration, ulceration, or tissue deterioration should be reported for further clinical evaluation [4,6,11].

Drain Fracture and Retained Drain Fragments

Drain fracture is an uncommon but potentially serious complication that may occur during removal or as a result of device deterioration, excessive traction, or material weakness. When a portion of the drain remains within the patient, the retained fragment may act as a foreign body and contribute to persistent inflammation, infection, abscess formation, chronic pain, or fistula development. A systematic review of reported retained surgical drain cases demonstrated that these incidents can require additional invasive interventions for identification and removal [9]. Prevention requires careful inspection of the drain before and after removal, avoidance of excessive force, and immediate escalation if resistance or unexpected breakage occurs. Nurses should document the integrity and completeness of the removed device and ensure that any suspected retained fragment is investigated through the appropriate clinical pathway.

Seroma and Hematoma Formation

Seroma formation involves the accumulation of serous fluid within a postoperative tissue space, whereas hematoma formation results from the accumulation of blood. Both conditions may develop when fluid evacuation is inadequate or when drainage is discontinued before the operative site has sufficiently stabilized. Seromas may present as localized swelling, fluctuation, discomfort, or persistent fluid leakage, while hematomas may produce more pronounced pain, discoloration, tissue tension,

and occasionally systemic manifestations of blood loss. The risk varies according to the surgical procedure, extent of tissue dissection, individual bleeding tendency, and postoperative management. Nurses should assess the operative site regularly and compare findings with previous observations. Unexpected swelling, increasing pain, or changes in drainage output should be communicated to the surgical team because these findings may require imaging, aspiration, or additional intervention [1,2,16].

Pain and Patient Discomfort

The presence of a surgical drain may cause discomfort through local tissue irritation, traction on surrounding structures, restricted movement, and anxiety associated with the device. Pain may become more pronounced during repositioning, coughing, mobilization, or dressing changes. Inadequately controlled discomfort can discourage early mobilization, reduce participation in respiratory exercises, and negatively influence the patient's overall recovery experience. Nurses should assess pain using an appropriate standardized scale and determine whether discomfort is localized to the insertion site or associated with deeper postoperative pathology. Tubing should be positioned to minimize pulling, and the drainage device should be secured in a manner that permits comfortable movement. Analgesic administration should follow the prescribed treatment plan, while new, severe, or progressively worsening pain should prompt assessment for obstruction, infection, displacement, or other complications rather than being attributed automatically to the presence of the drain [4,6].

Fluid and Electrolyte Disturbances

Patients with high-output drains may experience clinically important fluid and electrolyte losses, particularly when drainage contains substantial amounts of gastrointestinal, pancreatic, biliary, or other physiologically significant secretions. Prolonged or excessive fluid loss can contribute to dehydration, electrolyte abnormalities, and deterioration in renal function. The clinical significance depends on the type of fluid, the volume lost, the patient's baseline condition, and the ability to maintain adequate oral or intravenous replacement. Nurses should measure and document drainage accurately, recognize unexpectedly high output, and monitor relevant laboratory findings when prescribed. Fluid balance records should include oral intake, intravenous fluids, urinary output, and drain losses to provide a comprehensive assessment of the patient's hydration status. Abnormal findings should be communicated promptly so that further investigations and individualized replacement strategies can be considered [1,3].

Comprehensive Nursing Assessment of Surgical Drains

Comprehensive nursing assessment is the foundation of safe surgical drain management because it allows early identification of abnormalities before they progress into clinically significant complications. Assessment should be systematic, consistent, and adapted to the patient's surgical procedure and the type of drainage system used. It should include evaluation of the drain itself, the insertion site, the surrounding surgical wound, drainage characteristics, the patient's physiological condition, and the functional integrity of the device. Nurses should establish a baseline assessment immediately after postoperative admission and compare subsequent findings with previous measurements. This approach supports early detection of changes and improves communication between members of the healthcare team [4,10,11].

Initial Postoperative Assessment

The initial postoperative assessment should confirm the number, type, and anatomical location of all drainage devices. Nurses should review the operative documentation and relevant postoperative orders to understand the clinical indication for each drain, the expected drainage characteristics, and any specific restrictions. The external tubing should be inspected for kinking, compression, disconnection, or visible damage, while the collection reservoir should be assessed to confirm that it is appropriately positioned and functioning. The insertion site and surrounding dressing should be examined for bleeding, leakage, swelling, and skin abnormalities. Vital signs, pain level, consciousness, and general clinical stability should also be assessed because drain-related abnormalities may be associated with broader postoperative deterioration [4,11].

Assessment of Drainage Volume

Measurement of drainage volume provides valuable information about postoperative fluid loss and the effectiveness of the drainage system. Nurses should record output at intervals determined by the patient's condition, surgical requirements, and institutional policy. Measurements should be accurate and documented using consistent units, preferably milliliters. The drainage volume should be interpreted in relation to previous measurements, the time interval, and the type of operation. A gradual reduction in output may be expected during recovery, whereas sudden increases or unexplained cessation may indicate

complications. Importantly, a universal drainage-volume threshold should not be applied to all surgical procedures because expected output and removal criteria vary substantially between specialties and individual patients [4,16,17].

Assessment of Drainage Color and Consistency

The appearance of drainage fluid can provide additional clinical information beyond its volume. Early postoperative drainage may contain blood or serosanguineous fluid, followed by a gradual transition toward lighter-colored serous fluid depending on the procedure. Persistent bright-red drainage may suggest ongoing bleeding, while cloudy, thick, or purulent material may indicate infection. Greenish, yellowish, or bilious drainage in patients undergoing hepatobiliary procedures may require assessment for leakage, depending on the operative context. Similarly, unusual changes in the consistency or odor of drainage should be documented and reported. Nurses should avoid interpreting color in isolation and should always consider the surgical procedure, expected postoperative course, and accompanying clinical manifestations [1,3,4].

Table 2. Nursing interpretation of common changes in surgical drainage [1,3,4,7,11].

Drainage finding	Possible clinical significance	Recommended nursing response
Small and progressively decreasing output	Expected postoperative recovery in appropriate circumstances	Continue routine monitoring and documentation
Sudden increase in bright-red drainage	Possible active bleeding	Assess vital signs and notify the surgical team urgently
Sudden cessation of drainage	Possible obstruction, kinking, or displacement	Inspect tubing and reservoir; escalate suspected obstruction
Cloudy or purulent drainage	Possible infection	Assess wound and systemic signs; report promptly
Foul-smelling drainage	Possible infection or tissue breakdown	Perform focused assessment and communicate findings
Persistent high-volume clear fluid	Possible serous or lymphatic leakage	Measure accurately and inform the treating team
Bilious or feculent drainage	Possible biliary or gastrointestinal leakage	Urgent surgical assessment
Increasing leakage around insertion site	Possible blockage, displacement, or excessive output	Inspect fixation and dressing; escalate abnormalities
Drainage containing large clots	Possible bleeding or impaired patency	Assess the system and report promptly

Assessment of the Insertion Site and Surrounding Wound

The insertion site should be examined regularly for redness, swelling, warmth, tenderness, discharge, bleeding, and skin maceration. Nurses should also assess the surrounding surgical wound for separation, excessive tension, or other abnormalities. The condition of the dressing is important because wet, loose, or contaminated dressings may compromise wound protection. Assessment should include the relationship between the drain and the main surgical incision, particularly when leakage or localized inflammation is present. Any deterioration should be documented objectively, and the surgical team should be informed when findings suggest infection, wound disruption, or impaired drainage [7,8,11].

Assessment of the Patient's General Clinical Condition

Drain assessment should never be separated from the evaluation of the patient as a whole. Changes in vital signs, consciousness, pain, mobility, urine output, and general appearance may provide important evidence of postoperative complications. For example, increasing tachycardia and hypotension associated with rapidly increasing bloody drainage may indicate hemorrhage. Fever and systemic deterioration associated with purulent drainage may suggest infection. Reduced urine output in a patient with substantial drain losses may indicate inadequate circulating volume. Nurses should therefore integrate drain findings into comprehensive postoperative assessment and use institutional early warning systems when appropriate [7,8,13].

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Evidence-Based Nursing Strategies for Preventing Drain-Related Complications

Strict Hand Hygiene and Infection Prevention

Hand hygiene is one of the most important nursing interventions for preventing healthcare-associated infections. Nurses should perform hand hygiene before and after every episode of drain handling, including assessment, emptying, dressing changes, and removal-related care. Appropriate hand hygiene should be performed according to established clinical recommendations, using alcohol-based hand rub when indicated or soap and water when hands are visibly soiled or other specific circumstances require it. Gloves should be used according to standard precautions, but wearing gloves does not replace hand hygiene. Staff education and regular compliance monitoring are important to ensure that infection prevention practices are consistently applied [7,13,14].

Maintaining Aseptic Non-Touch Technique

Aseptic non-touch technique is essential during procedures that involve the insertion site, drainage connections, and components that may come into contact with sterile areas. Nurses should avoid touching critical parts of the system unnecessarily and should use appropriate sterile supplies when performing procedures that require aseptic handling. Drainage tubing should remain connected whenever possible, and unnecessary disconnection should be avoided. If the system becomes contaminated or its integrity is compromised, the nurse should follow institutional guidance and obtain appropriate clinical assistance. The objective is to minimize opportunities for microorganisms to enter the drainage pathway while preserving the normal function of the device [5,7,14].

Maintaining the Integrity of Closed Drainage Systems

Closed drainage systems should be maintained as sealed devices to reduce environmental contamination and facilitate reliable measurement of output. Nurses should routinely inspect connections between the tubing and reservoir, identify leakage or accidental disconnection, and ensure that the collection device remains secure. The reservoir should be handled carefully during emptying and reactivation, according to the manufacturer's instructions. The system should not be opened simply for convenience or unnecessary inspection. If a connection becomes disconnected, the nurse should immediately follow the applicable institutional protocol and report any potential contamination or loss of system integrity [2,4,6].

Appropriate Drain Positioning and Secure Fixation

Proper drain positioning supports effective fluid evacuation and reduces the risk of mechanical complications. Nurses should ensure that tubing is not compressed by the patient's body, trapped beneath the bed, or bent during repositioning. The collection reservoir should be secured in the appropriate position for the drainage mechanism, and sufficient tubing length should be maintained to allow comfortable movement without creating excessive loops or traction. Fixation should be checked after transfers, mobilization, and changes in body position. In patients with multiple drains, each device should be clearly identified and its location documented to reduce the risk of accidental handling errors [3,4,11].

Preventing Drain Obstruction

Prevention of obstruction requires routine inspection of the entire external drainage pathway. Nurses should assess for kinking, twisting, compression, and visible accumulation of clots or thick secretions. A sudden decrease in output should be interpreted in relation to the patient's clinical condition and previous drainage pattern. The nurse should inspect the tubing and reservoir before assuming that the drain is no longer required. Unprescribed manipulation, forceful stripping, or irrigation should be avoided because these interventions may cause tissue injury or compromise the drainage system. If blockage is suspected, the responsible clinical team should be notified so that an appropriate intervention can be selected [3,4,10].

Preventing Accidental Drain Displacement

Accidental displacement can be reduced through secure fixation, appropriate tubing arrangement, and patient education. Nurses should check the drain's fixation points and insertion-site stability during routine assessment and before assisting the patient with mobilization. Tubing should be positioned to avoid entanglement with bed rails, clothing, or mobility equipment. Patients should be instructed not to pull, reposition, or manipulate the drain independently. Special attention should be given to patients who are confused, agitated, or at risk of accidental device removal. If displacement occurs, the nurse should protect the insertion site and obtain immediate clinical guidance rather than attempting to reinsert the device [4,11].

Safe Emptying and Measurement of Drainage Reservoirs

Drain reservoirs should be emptied when required by their capacity, the manufacturer's recommendations, or institutional policy. The procedure should be performed using appropriate hand hygiene, personal protective equipment, and a clean technique that minimizes contamination. Nurses should avoid allowing the drainage outlet to contact nonsterile surfaces and should ensure that the reservoir is correctly reactivated when the device requires negative pressure. The collected fluid should be measured accurately and disposed of according to clinical waste procedures. The amount, appearance, and time of emptying should be documented clearly. In patients with substantial fluid losses, the accumulated output should be incorporated into the overall fluid balance assessment [3,4,10].

Appropriate Dressing and Insertion-Site Care

The dressing surrounding a surgical drain should protect the insertion site while allowing appropriate inspection and management of drainage leakage. Dressing selection should depend on the amount of exudate, skin condition, location of the drain, and institutional wound care policy. Nurses should assess whether the dressing is clean, dry, secure, and free from excessive saturation. Wet or contaminated dressings should be replaced using appropriate aseptic technique, while unnecessary dressing changes should be avoided when the dressing remains intact and the clinical protocol does not require replacement. Skin protection is particularly important in patients with continuous leakage because prolonged exposure to moisture may result in maceration and discomfort [7,8,11].

Prevention of Drain-Related Pain and Discomfort

Nurses can reduce discomfort through secure fixation, appropriate tubing arrangement, gentle handling, and timely pain assessment. Before mobilization or repositioning, the drain should be checked to ensure that it will not become trapped or pulled. Patients should be encouraged to report new or increasing pain rather than attempting to adjust the device independently. Prescribed analgesics should be administered appropriately, and the effectiveness of pain management should be reassessed. Persistent pain despite appropriate analgesia should prompt evaluation for mechanical problems, infection, obstruction, or other postoperative complications [4,6].

Monitoring Fluid Balance and High-Output Drainage

Accurate fluid balance monitoring is particularly important for patients with high-output drains or drainage containing physiologically significant secretions. Nurses should document the total volume of drainage over each prescribed interval and compare it with oral and intravenous intake and urinary output. Unexpectedly high losses should be communicated promptly, particularly when associated with thirst, hypotension, tachycardia, reduced urine output, or laboratory abnormalities. The treating team may require additional investigations and individualized fluid or electrolyte replacement. Nurses should not assume that all drainage losses are clinically insignificant simply because the patient appears stable at the time of assessment [1,3].

Nursing Management of Surgical Drain Removal

Drain removal is an important stage of postoperative care because inappropriate timing or technique may result in bleeding, tissue injury, retained fragments, fluid accumulation, and wound complications. The decision to remove a surgical drain should be made according to the surgical procedure, the patient's clinical condition, the purpose of the drain, and the characteristics of the drainage. Nurses play an important role in preparing the patient, verifying the prescribed removal plan, monitoring the procedure, and assessing the insertion site afterward. Although drainage-volume thresholds are frequently used in clinical practice, no single threshold is appropriate for every type of surgery. Removal decisions should therefore follow procedure-specific recommendations and the treating surgeon's instructions [4,10,16].

Criteria for Evaluating Drain Removal

Before removal, nurses should verify that the responsible clinician has evaluated the ongoing need for drainage. Relevant considerations include the amount and trend of fluid production, the nature of the drainage, the condition of the surgical wound, the presence or absence of clinical evidence of infection, and the risk of postoperative fluid accumulation. In selected procedures, biochemical assessment of drainage fluid may also be required, particularly when monitoring for pancreatic or biliary leakage. A drain should not be removed solely because its output has decreased if the patient demonstrates signs of

obstruction or an unresolved postoperative complication. Similarly, prolonged retention without a continuing clinical indication should be avoided because unnecessary device exposure may increase discomfort and potential complications [2,10,16].

Preparation of the Patient for Drain Removal

Patient preparation should begin with an explanation of the procedure, its expected duration, and the sensations that may occur. Nurses should assess the patient's pain level, provide prescribed analgesia when appropriate, and ensure that the patient is positioned comfortably. The necessary supplies should be prepared before starting, including gloves, appropriate protective equipment, sterile dressing materials, and any other items required by institutional policy. The nurse should verify the patient's identity, confirm the correct drain and removal order, and review any relevant restrictions. If multiple drains are present, each should be identified carefully to prevent removal of the wrong device. Maintaining patient privacy and providing reassurance can reduce anxiety and improve cooperation [4,10,17].

Safe Drain Removal Technique

Drain removal should be performed by an appropriately trained and authorized healthcare professional in accordance with the device instructions and institutional protocol. The insertion site should be prepared using the recommended aseptic technique, and any fixation sutures should be managed appropriately. The drain should be withdrawn gently and steadily according to the prescribed method. Excessive force should never be applied when resistance is encountered because this may indicate tissue adherence, entrapment, or a mechanical problem. Unexpected resistance, severe pain, or suspected breakage requires the procedure to be stopped and the surgical team informed. After removal, the drain should be inspected to confirm that it is intact and complete. The insertion site should then be dressed appropriately, and the condition of the surrounding tissues should be documented [4,9,10].

Post-Removal Assessment and Monitoring

Following removal, nurses should assess the insertion site for bleeding, leakage, swelling, and signs of infection. A dressing should be applied according to institutional guidance and the expected amount of residual drainage. Patients should be monitored for increasing pain, new swelling, fever, or other evidence of fluid accumulation or wound complications. The nurse should document the date and time of removal, the condition and integrity of the removed drain, the appearance of the site, and any immediate patient response. If the removed device appears incomplete or a fragment is suspected to remain within the patient, the surgical team should be notified immediately for further assessment. Follow-up should continue according to the clinical condition and the type of procedure performed [9,10,11].

Table 3. Nursing responsibilities before, during, and after surgical drain removal [4,9,10,17].

Stage	Nursing responsibilities	Patient safety considerations
Before removal	Verify the order, assess output trends, evaluate the wound, explain the procedure, and prepare equipment	Confirm the correct drain and clinical indication
During removal	Maintain aseptic technique, assist with positioning, observe patient response, and follow the authorized removal procedure	Stop if unexpected resistance, severe pain, or breakage occurs
Immediately after removal	Inspect the removed device, assess the insertion site, and apply an appropriate dressing	Confirm drain integrity and identify bleeding or retained fragments
Subsequent monitoring	Assess pain, swelling, leakage, wound condition, and systemic signs	Escalate suspected infection or fluid accumulation
Documentation	Record removal details, device integrity, site condition, and patient response	Maintain continuity and traceability of postoperative care

Patient Education and Discharge Planning

Patient education is an essential element of safe postoperative drain management, particularly when patients are discharged before their surgical drains are removed. The transition from hospital-based care to home management requires patients and

caregivers to acquire sufficient knowledge and practical skills to maintain the device safely. Nurses should provide education using clear language, demonstrations, written instructions, and opportunities for patients to ask questions. The information should be adapted to the patient's educational background, language, cognitive abilities, and level of independence. Where necessary, a family member or caregiver should participate in the educational process to ensure that appropriate support is available after discharge [14,15].

Teaching Patients About the Purpose and Function of Surgical Drains

Patients should understand why the drain was inserted, the type of fluid it is expected to collect, and how the device contributes to postoperative management. Explaining its purpose may reduce anxiety and discourage unnecessary manipulation. Nurses should demonstrate the basic components of the drainage system, including the tubing, insertion site, collection reservoir, and any suction mechanism. Patients should also be informed that drainage volume and appearance may change during recovery, but unexpected changes must not be ignored. Clear explanations help patients recognize the difference between routine device function and findings that require professional assessment [15,16].

Teaching Drain Emptying and Output Recording

When patients are expected to empty their drainage reservoirs at home, nurses should demonstrate the procedure and allow patients to practice under supervision. Education should include hand hygiene before and after handling the device, safe emptying according to the manufacturer's instructions, appropriate restoration of suction when applicable, and accurate recording of drainage volume. Patients should be instructed to record the date, time, amount, and relevant changes in drainage appearance using a simple chart or written record. They should also understand that the reservoir should not be opened unnecessarily and that they should contact the healthcare team if they cannot restore normal device function. The specific instructions must be adapted to the device and the patient's surgical procedure [4,15].

Teaching Dressing Care and Personal Hygiene

Patients should receive clear instructions regarding the care of the drain insertion site and surrounding dressing. They should understand how to maintain the dressing according to the surgical team's instructions, recognize signs of leakage or contamination, and avoid applying unprescribed substances or topical products. Bathing and showering instructions should be individualized because recommendations differ according to the type of drain, wound condition, and surgical procedure. Patients should avoid immersing the device or exposing the insertion site to potentially contaminated water unless specifically permitted by the treating team. Any dressing that becomes excessively wet, loose, or contaminated should be managed according to the provided instructions or reported to the healthcare service [14,15].

Activity Restrictions and Prevention of Accidental Displacement

Patients should be encouraged to maintain appropriate mobility while protecting the drainage device from excessive traction. The drain should be secured to clothing or an appropriate support system as instructed, and tubing should be arranged to prevent entanglement. Patients should avoid pulling, twisting, cutting, or attempting to reposition the drain independently. Activity restrictions should be based on the underlying operation rather than the presence of the drain alone. Nurses should explain how to manage the device during walking, sleeping, dressing, and routine activities. Patients should also be advised to seek assistance if the device becomes loose, disconnected, or accidentally displaced [4,15].

Recognition of Warning Signs and When to Seek Medical Assistance

Patients and caregivers should be taught to recognize warning signs that require prompt clinical evaluation. These include fever, increasing pain, redness, swelling, warmth around the insertion site, foul-smelling or purulent drainage, sudden changes in output, persistent leakage, and accidental disconnection or displacement. Rapidly increasing bloody drainage, severe dizziness, fainting, or symptoms suggestive of circulatory instability require urgent medical attention. Patients should receive clear contact information and instructions about where to seek assistance outside normal clinic hours. Education should emphasize that patients should not attempt to push a displaced drain back into the wound, repair damaged tubing, or independently remove a device unless an explicitly authorized home-removal program has been established [9,15].

The Role of Caregivers in Home Drain Management

Caregivers may provide important assistance to patients who have limited mobility, impaired vision, reduced dexterity, or difficulty understanding device-related instructions. Nurses should assess whether the caregiver is willing and capable of participating in drain management and provide appropriate practical training. Both patients and caregivers should demonstrate an understanding of hand hygiene, reservoir handling, output measurement, dressing precautions, and warning signs before discharge. Written instructions should be accessible and sufficiently detailed to support home management. For selected patients, scheduled telephone contact, outpatient nursing review, or other follow-up arrangements may improve continuity and allow early identification of complications [14,15].

Table 4. Essential patient education components for individuals discharged with surgical drains [4,14,15].

Educational component	Information to be provided	Expected patient competency
Purpose of the drain	Reason for placement and expected function	Explains why the drain is necessary
Hand hygiene	Correct hand cleaning before and after handling	Demonstrates appropriate hand hygiene
Reservoir management	Emptying, measuring, and restoring suction when required	Performs the prescribed procedure safely
Drainage recording	Measuring and documenting volume and appearance	Maintains an accurate drainage record
Insertion-site care	Dressing protection and hygiene precautions	Identifies a clean, intact dressing
Device protection	Secure fixation and prevention of traction	Prevents accidental pulling or displacement
Warning signs	Infection, bleeding, obstruction, and leakage	Recognizes abnormalities requiring assistance
Follow-up	Contact details and scheduled clinical review	Knows when and how to seek medical advice

Special Considerations in Different Surgical Specialties

The management of surgical drains varies according to the anatomical site, nature of the operation, expected fluid production, and potential complications associated with the underlying procedure. Nurses should therefore adapt their assessment and preventive interventions to the specific surgical specialty rather than applying identical drainage criteria to all patients. The characteristics of abdominal, orthopedic, breast, cardiovascular, thoracic, and neurosurgical drainage systems may differ substantially, particularly regarding the expected drainage volume, clinical significance of fluid composition, and urgency of abnormal findings [1,3,16].

Abdominal and Gastrointestinal Surgery

Patients undergoing abdominal surgery may require drains to evacuate postoperative blood, serous fluid, infected collections, or secretions associated with gastrointestinal and hepatobiliary procedures. Nursing assessment should focus on drainage volume, color, consistency, odor, and any unexpected appearance of bile, intestinal contents, or pancreatic secretions. Changes in abdominal distension, tenderness, bowel function, temperature, and hemodynamic status should also be considered. Excessive or unusual drainage may indicate leakage or other intra-abdominal complications requiring urgent evaluation. Fluid balance monitoring is particularly important in patients with high-output abdominal drains because significant losses may contribute to dehydration and electrolyte disturbances [1,3].

Orthopedic Surgery

Surgical drains may be used following selected orthopedic procedures to evacuate blood and postoperative fluid from operative spaces. Nurses should monitor drainage volume, wound appearance, limb swelling, pain, and signs of excessive bleeding. In patients undergoing joint replacement or extensive musculoskeletal procedures, attention should also be directed toward

neurovascular assessment, mobility, and the prevention of complications associated with immobility. Drain tubing should be secured carefully to prevent interference with rehabilitation activities. The timing of removal should follow the procedure-specific surgical plan and should not be determined by an arbitrary volume threshold alone [2,16].

Breast and Plastic Surgery

Closed suction drains are commonly encountered in breast surgery, reconstructive procedures, and operations involving extensive tissue dissection. Their function may include evacuating fluid from potential spaces and reducing the accumulation of seroma or hematoma. Nursing care should include monitoring output trends, assessing the surrounding skin, and evaluating the surgical site for swelling, asymmetry, pain, and signs of infection. Patients discharged with drains may require detailed home management education because devices can remain in place beyond the initial hospitalization. Drain removal criteria may consider daily output, the size of the surgical space, the type of reconstruction, and the surgeon's clinical judgment [4,16].

Cardiothoracic and Thoracic Surgery

Drainage systems used in thoracic surgery require specialized nursing assessment because they may be designed to remove air, blood, or fluid from the pleural cavity. Nurses should monitor the patient's respiratory status, oxygenation, chest movement, drainage characteristics, and the function of the prescribed collection system. Any sudden respiratory deterioration, unexpected changes in drainage, or suspected system disconnection requires immediate clinical assessment. Chest drainage devices should be managed according to dedicated thoracic drainage protocols and should not be treated as interchangeable with routine wound suction drains. Their specialized monitoring requirements emphasize the importance of appropriate training and competency assessment among nursing staff [3,11].

Neurosurgery

Following selected neurosurgical procedures, drains may be used to remove cerebrospinal fluid, blood, or other postoperative collections. These devices require particularly careful management because inappropriate drainage or alterations in prescribed positioning may have serious neurological consequences. Nurses should follow specific neurosurgical orders regarding drain height, positioning, monitoring intervals, and permitted manipulation. Neurological observations should be performed as prescribed, and changes in consciousness, headache, neurological function, or drainage characteristics should be reported immediately. Nurses should never independently alter the height, pressure settings, or drainage rate of a specialized neurosurgical device without appropriate authorization [3,11].

Factors Influencing the Risk of Drain-Related Complications

The likelihood of drain-related complications is influenced by a combination of patient-related, procedure-related, and device-related factors. Understanding these factors enables nurses to identify high-risk patients and prioritize preventive interventions. Patient characteristics such as advanced age, diabetes, obesity, malnutrition, immunosuppression, smoking, and impaired circulation may compromise tissue healing or increase infection susceptibility. Procedure-related factors include the extent of surgical dissection, contamination level, anatomical location, duration of surgery, and the presence of underlying infection. Device-related factors include the drainage mechanism, material, insertion-site location, fixation method, and duration of use. Nurses should incorporate these considerations into postoperative assessment and communicate identified risks during multidisciplinary care planning [7,8,13].

Table 5. Risk factors for surgical drain complications and corresponding preventive nursing interventions [2,7,8,13,16].

Risk factor	Potential complication	Preventive nursing intervention
Diabetes mellitus	Infection and delayed wound healing	Monitor glucose management as prescribed and assess wound integrity
Obesity	Increased wound tension, leakage, and infection	Inspect the insertion site and maintain appropriate dressing protection
Malnutrition	Impaired tissue repair	Monitor nutritional status and communicate concerns
Immunosuppression	Increased susceptibility to infection	Reinforce aseptic practices and monitor for subtle infection signs

Advanced age	Skin injury and accidental displacement	Provide secure fixation and individualized assistance
Reduced mobility	Traction and device displacement	Support tubing during transfers and mobilization
Confusion or agitation	Accidental drain removal	Increase observation and provide appropriate device protection
Prolonged drain retention	Increased device exposure and discomfort	Review ongoing clinical necessity regularly
Inadequate hand hygiene	Microbial contamination	Apply hand hygiene protocols and staff education
Poor fixation	Drain displacement and tissue injury	Inspect and reinforce appropriate fixation
High-output drainage	Dehydration and electrolyte abnormalities	Monitor fluid balance and report excessive losses
Extensive surgical dissection	Seroma, hematoma, and increased drainage	Monitor wound appearance and output trends closely

Multidisciplinary Collaboration in Surgical Drain Management

Effective prevention of drain-related complications requires coordinated communication among nurses, surgeons, infection prevention professionals, wound care specialists, pharmacists, and other members of the healthcare team. Nurses are often the healthcare professionals who observe the drain most frequently and are therefore well positioned to identify early abnormalities. However, the interpretation and management of these abnormalities may require surgical assessment, diagnostic investigations, antimicrobial decisions, or changes in the postoperative plan. Clear communication reduces delays and supports consistent decision-making, particularly when patients have multiple drains or complex surgical conditions [7,8,13].

Communication Between Nurses and Surgical Teams

Nurses should communicate significant changes in drainage volume, color, consistency, and odor, as well as abnormalities involving the insertion site or drainage system. Communication should include the time of observation, the magnitude of the change, associated clinical findings, and relevant previous measurements. Structured communication approaches can help ensure that important information is conveyed accurately during handovers and urgent clinical escalation. Nurses should also clarify any uncertainty regarding drain manipulation, flushing, suction settings, or removal criteria rather than relying on assumptions or informal practices. Clear documentation of clinical decisions and follow-up actions is necessary to maintain continuity of care [4,11,13].

Collaboration with Infection Prevention and Control Teams

Infection prevention professionals can support surgical units by developing standardized policies, monitoring infection trends, conducting audits, and providing staff education. Their involvement is particularly valuable when surgical units experience increased rates of surgical site infection or inconsistent compliance with aseptic practices. Nurses should participate in infection prevention initiatives by reporting suspected infections, following surveillance procedures, and implementing corrective measures identified through audits. The use of standardized infection prevention bundles can improve consistency across postoperative care settings and strengthen accountability among healthcare professionals [7,8,13,14].

Role of Wound Care Specialists

Wound care specialists may provide additional support when patients experience persistent leakage, insertion-site damage, maceration, wound dehiscence, or complex dressing requirements. They can assist with selecting appropriate dressings, protecting surrounding skin, and developing individualized wound management plans. Collaboration is particularly important for patients with poor tissue healing, extensive surgical wounds, or multiple drainage devices. Early referral may prevent deterioration and help coordinate interventions between surgical and nursing teams [8,11].

Documentation and Continuity of Nursing Care

Accurate documentation is essential for safe drain management because it provides a continuous record of device function, drainage characteristics, patient response, and clinical interventions. Documentation should be objective, consistent, and sufficiently detailed to allow other healthcare professionals to recognize changes in the patient's condition. Nurses should record the type and location of each drain, drainage volume, fluid appearance, insertion-site condition, dressing status, and any abnormalities identified during assessment. Interventions such as emptying, dressing changes, patient education, suspected obstruction management, and communication with the surgical team should also be documented. Accurate records support clinical decision-making and reduce the risk of errors during shift changes and transfers between departments [4,11].

Standardized Drain Monitoring Records

Standardized documentation forms can improve consistency by providing designated fields for the information required during routine drain assessment. These records should facilitate comparison of drainage output over time and allow early identification of unexpected trends. Electronic documentation systems may further support monitoring through structured data entry, reminders, and clinical alerts when appropriate. However, electronic records should complement rather than replace direct patient assessment. Nurses must ensure that recorded measurements accurately reflect actual observations and that significant abnormalities are communicated directly to the responsible clinical team [11,13].

Quality Improvement and Patient Safety Initiatives

Improving surgical drain safety requires more than individual nursing competence; it also depends on organizational policies, staff training, adequate supplies, and continuous evaluation of clinical practice. Healthcare institutions should establish standardized protocols covering drain assessment, infection prevention, reservoir management, patient education, and removal procedures. These protocols should be accessible to all relevant staff members and reviewed periodically to reflect updated evidence and changes in device technology. Implementation should be supported by practical education and competency assessment rather than relying exclusively on written policies [7,8,13].

Staff Training and Competency Development

Nursing staff should receive structured education regarding the different types of surgical drains, their mechanisms of action, common complications, and the specific procedures required for safe maintenance. Training should include practical demonstrations of reservoir emptying, maintenance of closed systems, aseptic dressing changes, recognition of abnormal drainage, and appropriate escalation. Competency assessments can help identify knowledge gaps and reduce variation between healthcare professionals. Newly employed nurses and staff transferred to surgical units should receive appropriate orientation before independently undertaking specialized drain care [4,8,13].

Use of Nursing Checklists and Standardized Care Bundles

Nursing checklists can help ensure that essential drain management activities are completed consistently. A structured checklist may include hand hygiene, inspection of tubing, confirmation of reservoir function, measurement of output, assessment of the insertion site, and documentation of findings. These measures can be incorporated into routine postoperative observation schedules and nursing handover processes. Standardized care bundles may also support compliance with infection prevention practices and facilitate monitoring of clinical performance. However, checklists should support professional judgment rather than replace individualized assessment or clinical escalation when abnormalities occur [7,8,13].

Auditing and Evaluation of Nursing Practice

Regular audits can identify gaps in adherence to established drain care procedures and provide opportunities for targeted improvement. Relevant indicators may include the completeness of drain documentation, hand hygiene compliance, frequency of unplanned disconnections, drain-related infection rates, accidental displacement incidents, and completeness of patient discharge education. Findings should be shared with nursing staff and relevant clinical departments to encourage accountability and continuous learning. Quality improvement initiatives should focus not only on complication rates but also on the reliability of preventive processes that reduce avoidable harm [8,13].

Ethical and Professional Considerations in Surgical Drain Care

Professional nursing practice requires respect for patient autonomy, dignity, privacy, and informed participation in postoperative care. Patients should receive understandable explanations regarding the purpose of their drainage devices and the interventions performed during routine management. Nurses should obtain appropriate consent according to institutional policy before procedures requiring consent and should maintain confidentiality when documenting and communicating clinical information. They should also recognize the limits of their professional authority and avoid performing interventions outside their scope of practice. Suspected device malfunction, unexpected resistance during removal, or signs of serious complications should be escalated to the appropriate clinician. These professional responsibilities support patient safety and help maintain trust between patients and healthcare professionals [10,13,15].

Challenges in Preventing Surgical Drain Complications

Despite established infection prevention recommendations and nursing care principles, several challenges may interfere with the consistent implementation of safe drain management. High nursing workloads, inadequate staffing, limited access to specialized training, shortages of appropriate dressing supplies, and inconsistent institutional policies may contribute to variations in care. In some clinical environments, differences in individual staff practices may result in unnecessary drain manipulation or inconsistent documentation. Patients may also experience difficulties managing devices at home because of limited health literacy, inadequate caregiver support, or insufficient access to follow-up services. Addressing these challenges requires organizational support, practical staff education, standardized procedures, and improved communication between hospitals and community healthcare services [8,13,15].

Another challenge concerns the variability of evidence regarding the optimal timing of surgical drain removal. Although prolonged drain retention may expose patients to unnecessary discomfort and device-related risks, premature removal may increase the possibility of fluid accumulation in selected procedures. Evidence does not support a universal removal threshold for all surgical drains, and clinical decisions must be individualized. Nurses should therefore avoid interpreting commonly used volume criteria as mandatory rules and should instead integrate output trends, drainage characteristics, wound findings, and procedure-specific instructions into the overall assessment. This approach supports safer decisions and prevents inappropriate application of generalized recommendations [2,7,16].

Emerging Developments in Surgical Drain Management

Advances in surgical technology and postoperative care have encouraged the development of drainage systems with improved materials, collection mechanisms, and patient-friendly designs. Some modern devices are designed to facilitate more accurate monitoring, improve mobility, and simplify home management. The increasing use of enhanced recovery pathways has also encouraged a more selective approach to drain placement and earlier reassessment of ongoing drainage requirements. These developments emphasize that the presence of a drain should not automatically result in prolonged hospitalization or unnecessary restrictions when patients can safely manage their devices through appropriate education and follow-up arrangements [1,2,15].

Digital monitoring and remote patient follow-up may offer additional opportunities to improve postoperative drain management. Structured electronic records and remote communication systems can facilitate the review of drainage measurements, support patient education, and enable earlier reporting of concerning symptoms. However, remote monitoring should not replace necessary physical examination or urgent clinical assessment. Its usefulness depends on patient access to technology, reliable communication, clear escalation pathways, and appropriate clinical oversight. Nurses can contribute to these developments by providing digital education, reviewing reported drainage trends, and ensuring that patients understand when an in-person assessment is required [13,15].

Implications for Nursing Practice

The prevention of complications associated with surgical drains has important implications for the quality, safety, and continuity of postoperative nursing care. Nurses should possess adequate knowledge of drain classifications, indications, mechanisms, and potential adverse events to provide appropriate individualized care. Clinical assessment should be performed systematically, with attention to drainage characteristics, device integrity, insertion-site condition, patient symptoms, and physiological stability. Preventive interventions should prioritize hand hygiene, aseptic non-touch technique, maintenance of closed systems,

appropriate fixation, accurate output measurement, and avoidance of unnecessary manipulation. Furthermore, nurses should recognize that timely communication and appropriate escalation are as important as routine technical drain care [4,7,8].

Nursing education should emphasize clinical reasoning rather than focusing exclusively on procedural skills. For example, reduced drainage output should prompt assessment of the patient and the device rather than an automatic assumption that the drain is ready for removal. Similarly, increasing bloody drainage should be evaluated alongside vital signs and the patient's general condition to identify possible hemorrhage. Nurses should also be trained to recognize the limitations of standardized drainage thresholds and understand that different procedures require different monitoring approaches. These competencies support early intervention and help prevent minor abnormalities from progressing into serious postoperative complications [2,4,10].

Patient-centered nursing care is equally important because surgical drains can affect comfort, mobility, body image, independence, and confidence during recovery. Nurses should address patients' concerns, provide practical guidance, and encourage participation in appropriate self-care activities. Discharge planning should begin early and include an assessment of the patient's ability to manage the device, availability of caregiver support, and access to follow-up services. Written instructions, demonstration, and confirmation of patient understanding can improve the safety of home drainage management. Through comprehensive education and individualized support, nurses can reduce avoidable complications while promoting patient autonomy and a positive recovery experience [14,15].

CONCLUSION

Surgical drains are valuable components of postoperative management because they facilitate the evacuation of accumulated fluids, support the management of surgical dead spaces, and provide clinically important information about the patient's recovery. However, their use is associated with potential complications, including surgical site infection, obstruction, accidental displacement, bleeding, tissue injury, seroma formation, fluid and electrolyte disturbances, and delayed wound healing. Preventing these complications requires a comprehensive approach that integrates appropriate device management, systematic nursing assessment, strict infection prevention practices, accurate documentation, and timely clinical intervention. Nurses have a central responsibility in maintaining drainage system integrity, monitoring output characteristics, protecting insertion sites, identifying early warning signs, and communicating abnormalities to the multidisciplinary healthcare team. Particular attention should be given to hand hygiene, aseptic non-touch technique, secure fixation, appropriate reservoir management, and avoidance of unnecessary manipulation. Furthermore, individualized assessment is essential because drainage requirements, expected output, and removal criteria vary according to the surgical procedure and the patient's clinical condition. Patient education and structured discharge planning are equally important for ensuring safe management among individuals who return home with indwelling drains. Healthcare institutions should strengthen postoperative drain safety through standardized nursing protocols, staff competency development, regular clinical audits, and continuous evaluation of infection prevention practices. Ultimately, integrating evidence-based nursing interventions with individualized patient-centered care can minimize preventable drain-related complications, improve postoperative recovery, promote wound healing, and enhance overall patient safety and quality of healthcare.

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