

What You Should Know About Staph and MRSA

Every day, it seems, we hear new reports of cases of MRSA infection. But what exactly is it? MRSA is a type of staph (*Staphylococcus aureus*) bacteria that has been with us for a long time. For most people, it's harmless, commonly carried on the skin or in the nose of healthy people. In fact, approximately 25 to 30 per cent of the population is colonized (when bacteria are present, but not causing an infection) in the nose with staph bacteria. Sometimes, it can cause an infection. Staph is one of the most common causes of skin infections in the US. Most of these skin infections are minor (such as pimples and boils) and can be treated without antibiotics (also known as antimicrobials or antibacterials). However, staph bacteria can cause serious infections such as surgical wound infections, bloodstream infections and pneumonia.

MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*), as its full name suggests, is a type of staph that is resistant to the antibiotics called beta-lactams, which include methicillin and other more common antibiotics such as oxacillin, penicillin and amoxicillin. Approximately 1 per cent of the population is colonized with MRSA.

Staph infections (including MRSA) occur most frequently among persons in hospitals and healthcare facilities (e.g., nursing homes and dialysis centers) who



have weakened immune systems. These healthcare-associated staph infections include surgical wound infections, urinary tract infections, bloodstream infections and pneumonia.

Community-Associated MRSA

When MRSA infections are acquired by persons who **have not** been recently (within the past year) hospitalized or had a

medical procedure (such as dialysis, surgery, catheters), they are known as Community-Associated MRSA (CA-MRSA) infections. Staph or MRSA infections in the community usually manifest as skin infections and occur in otherwise healthy people. Such skin infections may look like a pimple or boil and can be red, swollen, painful or have pus or other drainage. More serious infections may cause pneumonia, bloodstream infections or surgical wound infections

While approximately 25% to 30% of the population is colonized with staph bacteria, 1% of the population is colonized with MRSA.

In the outbreaks of MRSA, the environment has not played a significant role in its transmission, because MRSA is transmitted most frequently by direct skin-to-skin contact. You can protect yourself from infections with good hygiene (e.g., washing with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand rub and showering after working out), covering any

open skin area such as abrasions or cuts with a clean dry bandage, not sharing personal items such as towels or razors, using a barrier (e.g., clothing or a towel) between your skin and shared equipment, and cleaning equipment surfaces before and after use.

Steps for Prevention

- **Wash your hands!** Listen to your mother! She was right. The simplest act to help stop the spread of MRSA is to wash your hands, wash them often and wash them for at least 10 to 15 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizing gel.



- **Treat cuts, scrapes and abrasions immediately.** New wound-care treatments for minor cuts, scrapes and abrasions are starting to appear in the marketplace. Look for one that kills MRSA, or ask your first

aid supplier for a wound care gel or ointment that kills MRSA. Then, keep wounds covered with a bandage until healed. Open wounds can host MRSA.



- **Shower after physical activity.** The upsurge in sales of all-over deodorant and body sprays may indicate that fewer people are showering after physical activity these days, but it is important to note that the use

of these sprays should not be a substitute for showering after physical activity. Bacteria grow best in warm, moist environments such as those created after physical activity. Parents should alert their older children and teenagers to the need to shower after sports and other intensive physical activity.

- **Properly clean tools, gear and equipment.** Take time during the work day to clean the tools and equipment that can accumulate MRSA. Situations where workers share tools and gear may be ripe for the spread of infection-causing bacteria.
- **Avoid contact with other people's wounds or bandages.** Bacteria can live on wounds and bandages

and can easily spread. Never touch another person's wound directly.

- **Avoid sharing personal items such as towels or razors.** Razors are especially troublesome, since they can break the skin creating an open invitation for MRSA and other bacteria to enter the body. Bacteria can live on towels and similar items. Drying towels and clothing items in a dryer instead of hanging them up to dry can help to kill bacteria.
- **Wipe down gym equipment before and after it is used.** Some organizations offer gym equipment or a fitness center for workers. Be sure to wipe down the equipment with an appropriate cleaning solution.



For more information contact Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1600 Clifton Rd., Atlanta, GA 30333. Switchboard: 404 639 3311 / Public Inquiries: 404 639 3534 / 800 311 3435.

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