



MRSA – Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*

What is *Staphylococcus aureus* (staph)?

- *Staphylococcus aureus* (Staf-lo-coc-cus aw-ree-us) is a bacterium that is commonly carried in the nose and on the skin of healthy people. The bacterium is often referred to as "staph." It is estimated that 30 percent of the population carries staph on the skin or in the nose. Methicillin or penicillin and cephalosporins are generally used to treat staph infections. About 1 percent of persons have a type of staph resistant to these antibiotics called methicillin-resistant *staph aureus*, which is often referred to as MRSA. Other antibiotics must be used to treat MRSA infections. The drug Vancomycin has proven to be the most effective and reliable in these cases, but it is used intravenously and is not effective against MRSA when taken by mouth. Over the past 20 years, MRSA infections have occurred among patients in hospitals or long-term care facilities. However, MRSA infections are becoming more common in otherwise healthy persons who have not had contact with health care personnel or patients. These infections are known as "community-associated MRSA" or CA-MRSA infections.

What does a staph infection look like?

- Most infections caused by staph are skin infections, such as pimples or boils. Staph skin infections can be red, painful, swollen, or have pus or other drainage. More serious staph infections can also cause pneumonia and infections of the blood and joints.

How is staph spread?

- Staph can be easily spread by contaminated hands that have not been properly washed. It also can be transmitted by contact with secretions from infected skin lesions, wounds and nasal discharge, and objects and surfaces contaminated with staph. MRSA is not spread easier, but it is more difficult to treat.
- Close skin-to-skin contact; openings in the skin, such as abrasions or cuts; contaminated items or surfaces; and crowded living conditions are some factors linked to the spread of staph or MRSA skin infections among athletes, children, military recruits and correctional facility inmates.

If I have staph, or MRSA skin infection, what can I do to prevent others from getting infected?

- **Cover your wound.** Keep wounds that are draining or have pus covered with clean, dry bandages.
- **Follow your health care provider's instructions.** Pus from infected wounds can contain staph or MRSA. Keeping the infection covered will help prevent the spread to others. Bandages or tape can be thrown away with the regular trash.
- **Wash your hands.** You, your family, and others in close contact should wash hands often with soap and warm water, especially after changing a bandage or touching an infected wound. You can use an alcohol-based hand gel when soap and water are not available.
- **Do not share personal items.** Avoid sharing personal items, such as towels, washcloths, razors, clothing, or uniforms that may have had contact with the infected wound or bandage. Wash soiled sheets, towels, and clothes with water and laundry detergent. Drying clothes in a hot dryer, rather than air-drying, also helps kill bacteria in clothes.
- **Talk to your doctor.** Tell any health care providers who treat you that you have or had a staph or MRSA skin infection.

What to do to prevent staph skin infections

- Keep your hands clean by washing thoroughly with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand gel.
- Keep cuts and scrapes clean and covered with a bandage until healed.
- Avoid contact with other people's wounds or bandages.
- Avoid sharing personal items such as towels or razors.

Additional recommendations are available for the control of staph or MRSA skin infections when multiple cases occur in a group or school setting. Contact your local public health department or the Illinois Department of Public Health at 217-782-2016 for more information.

Adapted from MRSA information published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.