

Community-Associated MRSA: Frequently Asked Questions

What is MRSA?

MRSA is a type of bacteria called *Staphylococcus aureus* (*S. aureus*), often referred to simply as “staph.” MRSA are bacteria commonly carried on the skin or in the nose of healthy people. Some *S. aureus* are resistant to the class of antibiotics that are frequently used to treat staph such as methicillin—and thus are called methicillin-resistant *S. aureus* (MRSA).

How is MRSA diagnosed?

A sample of the infected wound (either a small biopsy of skin or pus taken with a swab) must be obtained to grow the bacteria in the microbiology laboratory. Once the staph is growing, the organism is tested to determine which antibiotics will be effective for treating the infection.

Who gets MRSA?

S. aureus (staph) including MRSA can be spread among people having close contact with infected people. MRSA is almost always spread by direct physical contact and not through the air. Spread may also occur through indirect contact by touching objects (e.g., towels, sheets, wound dressings, clothes, workout areas, or sports equipment) contaminated by the infected skin of a person with staph bacteria or MRSA.

Just as *S. aureus* can be carried on the skin or in the nose without causing any disease, MRSA can be carried in this way also. This is known as colonization.

MRSA infections are usually mild, superficial infections of the skin that can be treated successfully with proper skin care and antibiotics. MRSA, however, can be difficult to treat and can progress to life-threatening blood or bone infections because there are fewer effective antibiotics available for treatment. *Be sure to ask your physician to test for MRSA if you have unexplained, pus-producing wounds!

MRSA infections occur commonly among persons in hospitals and healthcare facilities. However, MRSA can cause illness in persons outside of hospitals and healthcare facilities as well. Cases of MRSA infection in the community have been associated with recent antibiotic use, sharing contaminated items, having recurrent skin diseases, and living in crowded settings. Most of the transmission in these settings appeared to be from people with active MRSA skin infections.

If my doctor or healthcare provider has told me that I have an MRSA skin infection, what can I do to care for the wound and prevent others from getting infected?

- You can prevent spreading an MRSA infection to those you live with or others around you by following these steps:
- Keep infections, particularly those that continue to produce pus or to drain material, covered with clean, dry bandages. Follow your healthcare provider’s instructions on proper care of the wound. Pus from infected wounds can contain MRSA and spread the bacteria to others.
- Advise your family and other close contacts to wash their hands frequently with soap and warm water, especially if they change your bandages or touch the infected wound or potentially infectious materials.
- Avoid sharing personal items (e.g., towels, washcloth, razor, clothing, uniforms, or sheets) that may have had contact with the infected wound and potentially infectious material. Wash linens and clothes that become soiled with hot water and laundry detergent. Drying clothes in a hot dryer, rather than air-drying, also helps kill bacteria in clothes.
- Use a separate hamper and separate all clothing, towels, and linens that come in contact with the wound from those items of other family members.
- Avoid sharing ointment or antibiotics.
- Disinfect all non-clothing items that come in contact with the wound with a fresh (prepared daily) mix of one tablespoon of household bleach to one quart of water or a phenol-containing product such as Lysol® or Pine-sol®. Use a phenol-containing spray to disinfect any cloth or upholstered surface.
- Discard all disposable materials that have come in contact with the wound in a separate trash bag and close the bag before placing in common garbage.
- Tell any healthcare providers who treat you that you have an antibiotic-resistant staph skin infection.

**REMEMBER: HAND WASHING IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT BEHAVIOR
IN PREVENTING INFECTIOUS DISEASE**