



## DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

# MRSA: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **What is MRSA?**

Staphylococcus aureus or "Staph," are bacteria that live on the skin and in the nose of healthy people, usually without causing harm. Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) is a kind of staph bacteria that has become resistant to several types of antibiotics. Bacteria develop resistance when antibiotics are used frequently. Staph infections and MRSA are most often found in hospitals or other healthcare facilities, where people have weakened immune systems. However, they are becoming more common in the community among people who do not have medical problems.

### **What do MRSA infections look like?**

Staph bacteria, including MRSA, can cause skin infections that may look like a pimple, boil, fluid filled blister or skin sores that look like infected skin bites.

### **How common are Staph and MRSA infections?**

Staph bacteria are one of the most common causes of skin infections in the United States and are a common cause of pneumonia, surgical wound infections and blood stream infections. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) about 12% of clinical MRSA infections are community associated.

### **How is MRSA treated?**

Because MRSA is resistant to many antibiotics, it can be difficult to treat. However, some antibiotics can successfully cure MRSA infections. When antibiotics are prescribed, take all of the doses even if the infection is getting better. Never share antibiotics with other people. Many staph skin infections may be treated by draining the abscess or boil and may not require antibiotics. This procedure should only be done by a healthcare provider. If the infection does not get better and/or you begin to feel worse, contact your health care provider immediately.

### **How is MRSA spread?**

MRSA is transmitted most frequently by prolonged direct skin-to-skin contact. Sharing contaminated objects such as towels and athletic equipment can also transmit MRSA. Some people carry MRSA in their nose but don't have symptoms of infection. MRSA is almost always spread through physical contact, not through the air. The environment has not played a significant role in outbreaks of MRSA.

### **How can I protect myself from getting MRSA?**

- Wash your hands with soap and water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover any cut or skin abrasion with a clean, dry bandage.
- Shower after exercise.
- Avoid sharing items like razors, towels, washcloths, clothing, etc.
- Use a towel or clothing as a shield between your skin and shared equipment.
- Wipe surfaces or equipment before and after use.
- Avoid contact with other people's wounds

### **How is MRSA prevented from spreading in the home?**

1. Regularly clean surfaces and commonly touched areas such as doorknobs, light switches, etc. with a disinfectant. Bleach solutions are easy to make and an inexpensive disinfectant: Mix one tablespoon of chlorine bleach to one quart of water (or ¼ cup chlorine bleach to one gallon of water). Make fresh daily and never mix bleach with any cleaners containing ammonia. Other disinfectants are available; always follow instructions when using them. Disinfectants should be applied liberally to the surface and allowed at least ten minutes to kill bacteria.
2. Take extra care with laundry. All soiled linens and towels should be handled separately. Use hot water and bleach and a hot dryer. Wear disposable gloves when handling soiled laundry and wash hands frequently after taking off gloves. Store linens in a plastic bag if they cannot be washed right away.
3. Handle waste and garbage with care. Bandages and tissues can be discarded with normal garbage, but secure in a tied plastic bag.
4. Handle infected wounds carefully. Wear disposable gloves when changing an infected wound bandage. Wash hands before and after glove use. Discard bandage appropriately in garbage container.

### **Can pets carry MRSA?**

It is possible for household pets (dogs and cats) to carry MRSA after being exposed to someone who has MRSA. Consult your veterinarian for treatment of pets so they no longer carry the bacteria or pass it back to you or a family member.

### **How do I prevent giving MRSA to others?**

1. Cover wounds at all times with clean dry bandages. This will keep the infection from spreading to others.
2. Wash your hands and avoid touching your infected wound. Wash hands with liquid soap and water or use alcohol based hand sanitizer.
3. Do not share personal items such as razors, sheets, washcloths, towels, uniforms or clothing. Use detergent in cleaning towels, clothes, etc, and set dryer on "hot" setting.
4. Tell any healthcare provider who treats you that you have a staph or MRSA skin infection.
5. Follow your healthcare provider's instructions regarding taking medication and returning to work or school.
6. Cover your mouth with a tissue or your sleeve when coughing. Discard the tissue in a wastebasket.
7. Avoid contact with those who have weak immune systems such as newborn babies, elderly and those with chronic disease.
8. Do not exercise in a public gym or engage in contact sports until infection is cleared and a health provider approves participation.
9. Until sores can be adequately covered with a bandage, stay home. A health care provider should approve your return to work or school.
10. Carry alcohol-based hand sanitizer when water and soap is not available.
11. Do not use a public sauna, hot tub or pool.
12. Avoid personal care services such as haircuts, manicures and massage until your wounds are healed.
13. Discuss your activities with a healthcare provider and employer if you work and/or volunteer in places where people have poor immune systems. Special precautions will most likely be needed.