

Living with MRSA

Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) Disease fact sheet

What is MRSA?

Some germs that commonly live on the skin and in the nose are called staphylococcus or "staph" bacteria. Usually, staph bacteria don't cause any harm. However, sometimes they get inside the body through a break in the skin and cause an infection. These infections are usually treated with antibiotics. When common antibiotics don't kill staph bacteria, it means the bacteria have become resistant to those antibiotics. This type of staph is called MRSA (Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus).

Anyone can get MRSA. Infections range from mild to very serious, even life-threatening. MRSA is contagious and can be spread to other people through skin-to-skin contact. If one person in a family is infected with MRSA, the rest of the family may get it.

MRSA was first identified in the 1960s and was mainly found in hospitals and nursing homes. This occurred because antibiotics were being given to people when they weren't needed, and patients were not taking antibiotics as directed. In the late 1990s, a new type of MRSA was identified. This type of MRSA is becoming more common among children and adults who do not have medical problems.

How do I get MRSA?

Anyone can get MRSA. You can get MRSA the same way you can get a cold, such as by touching someone or something that has bacteria on it and then touching your eyes or your nose. Washing your hands often reduces your chances of getting MRSA.

MRSA can live on surfaces and objects for months. However, it can be killed through proper cleaning methods.

Some ways that you could get MRSA:

- Touching the infected skin of someone who has MRSA.
- Using personal items of someone who has MRSA, such as towels, wash cloths, clothes or athletic equipment.
- Touching objects, such as public phones or door knobs, that have MRSA bacteria on the surface.
- Being in crowded places where germs are easily spread, such as hospitals, nursing homes, daycares or college dorms.

You may increase your chances of getting MRSA if:

- You take antibiotics a lot.
- You take antibiotics without a prescription.
- You don't follow directions when taking antibiotics, such as stopping early or missing doses.
- You are at greater risk of getting MRSA if you are recovering from surgery or burns, have tubes in your body for medical treatment, or if you share needles.

What can you do to prevent the spread of MRSA?

Practice good hygiene to reduce the amount of bacteria on your skin. Wash your hands often and shower daily. Washing your hands is the number one way to stop the spread of MRSA bacteria.

Always wash your hands thoroughly before preparing food, eating or drinking; before and after touching your eyes, nose, mouth, genitals, sores, acne, boils or rashes; before and after changing bandages; before and after smoking; before and after blowing your nose; after touching urine,

feces and body fluids, and items soiled by body fluids; after cleaning the bathroom, changing your bedding and doing laundry; after going to the bathroom; after coughing or sneezing; and after touching things other people touch, such as phones, door knobs or shopping carts.

How contagious is it?

If you have an active MRSA infection on your skin, it is contagious. If someone touches an infection, or touches something that came in contact with an infection (like a towel), that person could get MRSA.

If anyone is a MRSA carrier, they still have bacteria on their skin and in their nose. If hands are not washed properly, things that are touched by those hands can give the bacteria to other people. MRSA can also be found in the liquid that comes out of the nose or mouth when someone coughs or sneezes.

Remember, it is possible for anyone with MRSA to spread it to family, friends, other people close to them, and even to pets. Washing hands and preventing others from coming into contact with an infection are the best ways to avoid spreading MRSA.

How is MRSA treated?

MRSA should always be treated by a health care provider. It is important to follow the instructions for treatment that your provider gives you.

If you do not have an active infection, your health care provider may do tests to find out if you still carry MRSA bacteria on your skin. If you are a MRSA carrier, your provider may decide to:

- Do nothing, because the bacteria may go away without treatment.
- Reduce the amount of bacteria on your skin.

If you have an active MRSA infection, your provider may choose one or more of the following treatments:

- Drain the infection.
 - Give antibiotics.
 - Reduce the amount of bacteria on your skin.
1. Drain the infection: Don't do this yourself. It is very dangerous to squeeze or poke a skin infection because it can push the bacteria deeper into the skin and make the infection much worse. Draining the infection should only be done by a trained health care provider.
 2. The provider will open the sore and drain it. After the infection is drained, you must keep it covered until it heals. Sometimes your provider may ask you to come back for a checkup or to change the dressing. This is to make sure it is healing well. Some skin infections will heal after your health care provider has drained the pus out. You may not need an antibiotic.
 3. Give antibiotics: MRSA is resistant to many antibiotics so it can be difficult to treat. However, there are antibiotics that can treat MRSA and make the infection go away. Your provider may culture your infection and have the lab test the bacteria to find out which antibiotic is best for you. If your provider gives you antibiotics, take them exactly as prescribed. Do not stop early, even if you feel better. The last few pills kill the toughest germs. Never take antibiotics without a prescription from your health care provider.
 4. Reduce the amount of bacteria on your skin or in your nose: This may prevent the spread of MRSA if you have an active infection or if you are a carrier. To decrease the amount of bacteria on your skin, your provider may, for a short period of time, have you shower with an antibacterial soap, prescribe antibiotic pills, or prescribe antibiotic ointment to put in your nose for several days.