



Frequently asked questions about Methicillin Resistant Staph Aureus (MRSA)

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

Background: Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA, is an infection caused by bacteria — often called "staph." Decades ago, a strain of staph emerged in hospitals which are resistant to the broad-spectrum antibiotics commonly used to treat it. Dubbed methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), it was one of the first germs to outwit all but the most powerful drugs. MRSA infection can be fatal. Staph bacteria are normally found on the skin or in the nose of about one-third of the population. If you have staph on your skin or in your nose but aren't sick, you are said to be "colonized" but not infected with MRSA. Healthy people can be colonized with MRSA and have no ill effects, however, **they can pass the germ to others.**

About 85% of MRSA infections occur in healthcare settings (hospitals, nursing homes, etc.) and 15% occur in non-healthcare settings. In 2005, about 18,500 persons died from MRSA infections. To keep this in perspective, about 36,000 people die from the flu each year.

Causes:

Leading causes of antibiotic resistance include:

- Unnecessary antibiotic use. Like other superbugs, MRSA is the result of decades of excessive and unnecessary antibiotic use.
- Antibiotics in food and water. Prescription drugs aren't the only source of antibiotics. In the United States, antibiotics can be found in the meat of beef cattle, pigs and chickens.
- Germ mutation. Even when antibiotics are used appropriately, they contribute to the rise of drug-resistant bacteria because they don't destroy every germ they target.

The main risk factors for MRSA:

- Young age. MRSA can be particularly dangerous in children. Often entering the body through a cut or scrape, MRSA can quickly cause a wide spread infection. Children may be susceptible because their immune systems aren't fully developed or they don't yet have antibodies to common germs.
- Participating in contact sports. MRSA has crept into both amateur and professional sports teams. The bacteria spread easily through cuts and abrasions and skin-to-skin contact.
- Sharing towels or athletic equipment. Although few outbreaks have been reported in public gyms, MRSA has spread among athletes sharing razors, towels, uniforms or equipment.
- Having a weakened immune system. People with weakened immune systems, including those living with HIV/AIDS, are more likely to have severe MRSA infections.
- Living in crowded or unsanitary conditions.
- Association with health care workers. People who are in close contact with health care workers are at increased risk of serious staph infections.

When to seek medical advice

Keep an eye on minor skin problems — pimples, insect bites, cuts and scrapes — especially in children. If wounds become infected, see your doctor. Ask to have any skin infection tested for MRSA before starting antibiotics. Drugs that treat ordinary staph aren't effective against MRSA, and their use could lead to serious illness and more resistant bacteria.

How is MRSA diagnosed?

Doctors diagnose MRSA by checking a tissue sample or nasal secretions for signs of drug-resistant bacteria. Because it takes about 48 hours for the bacteria to grow, newer tests have been developed that can detect staph DNA in a matter of hours and are now widely available.

Is this “Super Bug” Treatable? YES. Strains of MRSA still respond to certain medications. In hospitals and care facilities, doctors generally rely on the antibiotic vancomycin to treat resistant germs. MRSA may be treated with vancomycin or other antibiotics that have proved effective against particular strains. Speak with your physician if you have questions about what is right for your situation.

How do I prevent myself and/or my family from getting MRSA?

Protecting yourself from MRSA — which might be just about anywhere — may seem almost impossible, but these common-sense precautions [can help reduce your risk](#):

- Keep personal items personal. Avoid sharing personal items such as towels, sheets, razors, clothing and athletic equipment. MRSA spreads on contaminated objects as well as through direct contact.
- Keep wounds covered. Keep cuts and abrasions clean and covered with sterile, dry bandages until they heal. The pus from infected sores often contains MRSA, and keeping wounds covered will help keep the bacteria from spreading.
- Sanitize linens. If you have a cut or sore, wash towels and bed linens in hot water with added bleach and dry them in a hot dryer. Wash gym and athletic clothes after each wearing.
- Wash your hands. Careful hand washing remains your best defense against germs. Scrub hands briskly for at least 15 seconds, then dry them with a disposable towel and use another towel to turn off the faucet. Carry a small bottle of hand sanitizer containing at least 62 percent alcohol for times when you don't have access to soap and water.
- Get tested. If you have a skin infection that requires treatment, ask your doctor if you should be tested for MRSA. Many doctors prescribe drugs that aren't effective against antibiotic-resistant staph, which delays treatment and creates more resistant germs.

Got questions? Contact us at any of our 4 office locations at:

Coldwater
517-279-9561 x 143

Hillsdale
517-437-7395 x 110

Sturgis
269-659-4013 x 107

Three Rivers
269-273-2161 x 241

Or

Visit us on the web at:

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