

# **MRSA** (Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*)

## Information for Patients – Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is MRSA?**

Staphylococcus aureus is a type of bacteria that can live on the skin and in the nose of healthy people. Usually, these bacteria don't cause any harm. However, if they get inside the body or into a break in the skin, they can cause an infection. These infections are usually treated with antibiotics. When common antibiotics don't kill the staph bacteria, it means the bacteria has become resistant to those antibiotics. This type of staph is called MRSA (Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus).

### **How do you test for MRSA?**

If you have symptoms of an infection, your health care provider may take a sample of blood, urine, respiratory fluid, or pus from a wound for culture. The lab will then test that sample to find out what bacteria are causing the infection, and what antibiotic is best for you.

Illinois law requires hospitals to test some patients for MRSA routinely. This testing is done by taking a sample from the nose using a swab. This test can find MRSA even if you do not have an active infection.

### **What does MRSA look like?**

Most often, MRSA causes infections on the skin, such as pimples or boils. MRSA skin infections can be red, painful, swollen, or have pus or other drainage. It is possible to have MRSA in other areas of the body, such as blood, lungs, joints, eyes, and urine. These types of infections are less common, although they can be more serious.

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

MRSA 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. MRSA can also be spread by touching contaminated objects, especially personal items such as towels, wash cloths, clothes or athletic equipment.

### **If I have MRSA now, will I always have MRSA?**

Maybe. Many people who have active infections are treated and no longer have MRSA. However, sometimes MRSA goes away after treatment and comes back several times. If MRSA infections keep coming back again and again, your health care provider can help you sort out the reasons you keep getting them.

Even if active infections go away, you can still have MRSA bacteria on your skin and in your nose. This means you are now a carrier of MRSA. You may not get sick or have any more infections, but you can spread MRSA to others. If you are a carrier, your provider may say that you are colonized. These words – “carrier” and “colonized” – mean the same thing.

## What precautions do hospitals take to prevent the spread of MRSA?

In a hospital, health care workers take many precautions to prevent spreading infection. Staff wash their hands, use hand sanitizer, and wear gloves to protect patients from germs. Equipment and surfaces are disinfected regularly with hospital-grade disinfectant.

When a patient has MRSA, additional precautions are taken in a hospital. If you have MRSA, a card that says "Contact Isolation" will be placed outside your door. Everyone that enters the room should wear a gown and gloves at all times.

## If I have MRSA, what can I do at home to prevent the spread of this germ?

- **Talk to your doctors.** If you have ever had a MRSA infection, or you are a carrier, tell all of your health care providers.
- **Follow your health care provider's instruction.** If your doctor gives you antibiotics, take them exactly as prescribed. Do not stop early, even if you feel better or if your infection looks healed. The last few pills kill the toughest germs. Never take antibiotics without a prescription from your doctor.
- **Cover your wounds.** Keep wounds that are draining or have pus covered with clean, dry bandages. If possible, wear clothes that cover your bandage and wound. Until the wound is healed, do not participate in contact sports or go to a public gym, sauna, hot tub or pool. Do not get manicures or massages until the wound is healed.
- **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 also use an alcohol-based hand gel to clean your hands.
- **Do not share personal items.** Towels, wash cloths, razors, clothes and other personal items can spread MRSA to others.
- **Clean surfaces.** Clean frequently used areas of your home (bathrooms, countertops, etc.) regularly with a household cleaner. You can use any cleaner you buy at the store that has the word "disinfectant" on it. Remember to read the label and follow the directions.
- **Launder items regularly.** Wash soiled sheets, towels, and clothes with regular laundry detergent and warm or hot water. Dry clothes in a hot dryer until completely dry, rather than air-drying.
- **Take good care of your skin.** Remember, MRSA lives on your skin. Any break or crack in your skin can allow it to enter and cause an infection. If you get a cut or scrape, clean it with soap and water and then cover it with a bandage.

## If I have MRSA, is it safe to be near my family members?

Yes, but you do need to take precautions. You will need to be especially careful if you are around people who have weak immune systems, such as newborn babies, the elderly, or anyone with a chronic disease. Washing your hands frequently and preventing others from coming in contact with your infections are the best ways to avoid spreading MRSA. Closely follow the precautions listed above. Make sure your family members wash their hands, too.

Pets, such as dogs and cats, can also get MRSA. Pets can have active infections or they can be carriers. If you keep getting MRSA infections, or if you see any signs of a skin infection on your pet, talk with your vet about testing your pet. Pets with MRSA can be treated.