
Living with MRSA



Learning how to control the spread of
Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA)

IMPORTANT

MRSA is a serious infection that can become life-threatening if left untreated. If you or someone in your family has been diagnosed with MRSA, there are steps you need to take now to avoid spreading it to your family and friends.

This booklet was developed with help from people who are living with MRSA. Follow the recommendations and practice good hygiene to take care of yourself. MRSA may cause physical pain and emotional stress, but keep in mind that it can be managed. This booklet tells you how you can live with MRSA. For more information on your MRSA infection, please contact your healthcare provider.



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What is MRSA and why is it so serious?

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 the staph bacteria, it means the bacteria have become resistant to those antibiotics. This type of staph is called MRSA (Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus).

MRSA was first identified in the 1960’s. At that time it was mainly found in healthcare settings. This occurred because antibiotics were being given to people when they weren’t needed, and patients were not taking antibiotics as directed. Today, MRSA is as common in the community as healthcare settings.

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 direct contact with contaminated surfaces or skin.

What does MRSA look like?

Most often, MRSA causes infections on the skin. These infections may look like any one of the following:

- Sores that look and feel like spider bites (However, MRSA is not caused by a spider bite.)
- Large, red, painful bumps under the skin (called boils)
- A cut that is swollen, hot and filled with pus
- Blisters filled with fluid

It is also possible to have MRSA in other areas of the body, such as blood, lungs, eyes, and urine. These types of infections are less common, although often more serious. This booklet will focus on skin infections, since they are the most common.

How can I get MRSA?

Anyone can get MRSA. You can get MRSA by touching surfaces or skin contaminated with the bacteria. Washing your hands often reduces your chances of getting MRSA.

MRSA can live on surfaces and objects for months. However, it can be killed though proper cleaning. (Go to the section on “Caring for Yourself” on page 6 to learn more about cleaning.)

Ways that you could get MRSA:

- Touching someone who has a MRSA skin infection
- Using personal items of someone who has MRSA, such as towels, wash cloths, clothes or athletic equipment
- Touching objects, such as public phones or doorknobs, that have MRSA bacteria on the surface
- Being in crowded places where germs are easily spread, such as a healthcare facility, childcare or college dorm

Your chances of getting MRSA may be increased if:

- You take antibiotics often
- 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.

There are two types of MRSA:

1. You can have an active infection. An active infection means you have symptoms. The types of symptoms depend on where the infection is located. Usually an active infection is a skin infection, such as a boil, a sore, or an infected cut.
2. You can be colonized. If you are colonized you do not have symptoms of illness, but you still have MRSA bacteria living on your body. If you are colonized, your provider may say that you are a carrier. These words — “carrier” and “colonized” — mean the same thing.

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, your healthcare provider can help you understand the reasons why you keep getting infections.

Even if active infections go away, you can still have MRSA bacteria on your skin and in your nose. This means you are colonized. You may not get sick or have any more skin infections, but you can spread MRSA to others. It is not fully understood why some people are colonized, yet don't get infections.

How contagious am I?

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

If you are colonized with MRSA, you have the bacteria on your skin and in your nose. If you don't wash your hands properly, things that you use or touch with your hands can give the bacteria to other people. MRSA can also be found in body fluids and secretions.

Remember, if you have MRSA it is possible to spread to others and even to pets. Washing your hands and preventing others from coming in contact with your infections are the best ways to avoid spreading MRSA.

How do I know if I have MRSA?

If your doctor thinks you have an active MRSA infection, he or she will collect blood, urine or fluid from a wound for testing.

If your MRSA infections keep coming back, your healthcare provider may test you or your family members to see if you are colonized. In this case, the provider would take a culture sample from the nose, where MRSA is often found.

How is MRSA treated?

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

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

➤ **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 healthcare provider.

The provider will open the sore and drain it. After the infection is drained, you must keep it covered until it heals. Your provider may ask you to come back for a checkup or to change the dressing. This is to make sure it is healing. Some skin infections will heal after your healthcare provider has drained the pus out.



TREATING MRSA

➤ ***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 healthcare provider.

➤ ***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 regularly with special antibacterial soap
- Prescribe antibiotic pills



When should I seek medical care?

- If you have any new symptoms, such as increased pain, swelling or redness, during or after treatment for a MRSA skin infection
- If the infection does not get better
- If the infection gets worse
- If the infection comes back



What if I do not have an active infection?

You healthcare 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
- Advise you to reduce the amount of bacteria on your skin

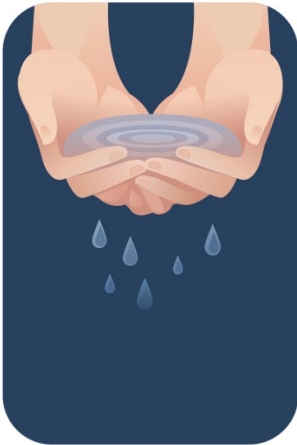
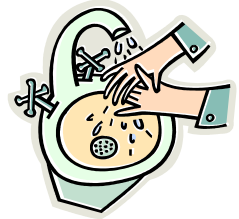
What do patients and visitors need to do when they go to a healthcare facility?

- If you have ever had a MRSA infection, tell all of your healthcare providers. Healthcare providers may use special precautions, such as wearing gowns and gloves when caring for you.
- Patients and visitors should wash their hands often with soap and water, especially if they are touching the infected skin, after using the bathroom and before eating.
- As recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), patients with MRSA should stay in their rooms and follow special precautions.
- Patients with MRSA should not go to “common” areas of the facility such as the cafeteria and gift shop. You may be asked to shower and/or change to a fresh, clean gown before leaving your room to go into other areas of the hospital.
- Visitors should check in with the nurse’s station prior to entering the patient’s room, follow the nurse’s instructions and always wash their hands before entering the room and before leaving the room.



What is the proper way to wash my hands?

- Wet your hands with warm, running water.
- Add soap and rub hands together; front and back including wrists and between fingers for 20 seconds.
- Don't forget to clean under finger nails.
- Rinse the soap from your hands.
- Dry your hands with a clean towel.



What is good hand hygiene?

Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water:

- After using the toilet or helping someone use the toilet
- After touching dirty surfaces and handling soiled laundry
- After handling items soiled by body fluids
- Before and after preparing meals/snacks
- Before eating meals
- Before and after taking or giving medications
- After caring for a sick person
- After playing with pets
- After sneezing, coughing, blowing your nose
- Anytime hands are visibly dirty

What is the proper way to clean clothes/other fabrics?

- Wash clothes/fabric separately if they're soiled with stool.
- Rinse off stool into the toilet.
- Clean in a hot water cycle with soap, use bleach when fabric is appropriate.
- Dry items in the dryer on high heat, if possible.

CARING FOR YOURSELF

What is the proper way to clean?

- Use a cleaner you can buy at the grocery store that has the word “disinfectant” on it. Remember to read the label and follow the directions.
- If using bleach alone, then follow the directions on the label—generally one part bleach to ten parts water (1:10 solution) made fresh daily. Never mix bleach with other cleaners.
- Wet the surface well and clean vigorously
- Allow the surface to air dry
- Pay special attention to toilet, sink and areas that are touched frequently such as door knobs and light switches.

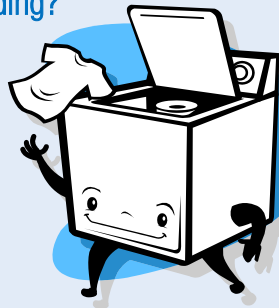
How often should I clean?

MRSA bacteria can live on surfaces for days, weeks and months. It is important to clean regularly. For items or surfaces you touch frequently, clean them every day.



How often should I change clothes and bedding?

- Change your sheets and towels regularly
- Change your clothes daily
- Do not put dirty clothes or clothes you have just worn back in your closet or drawers until they have been washed.





How can I prevent spreading MRSA (and other germs) at home?



- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after using the bathroom, before preparing food and before eating.
- Frequently launder towels used for drying your hands or use disposable towels.
- Wear disposable gloves if you expect to come into contact with drainage and bandages from infected wounds. Wash your hands after removing gloves.
- Frequently clean areas of your home, such as your bathroom, that may become contaminated with MRSA
- Take good care of your skin. Remember, MRSA lives on your skin. If you get a cut or scrape, clean it with soap and water and then cover it with a bandage.
- Do not touch sores. Do not squeeze or pop a pimple or sore. If you do touch a sore, wash your hands immediately.
- Keep wound dressings clean and dry. If the dressing is soaked with wound drainage, then change it. When changing bandages use gloves to remove old bandages. Dispose of used gloves and bandages in a plastic bag. Wash your hands.
- Do not share towels, razors, toothbrushes, or other personal items.
- Change and wash linens on a regular basis, or any time they are soiled.
- Notify healthcare providers if you are infected or colonized with MRSA.



How can I prevent spread of MRSA to others?

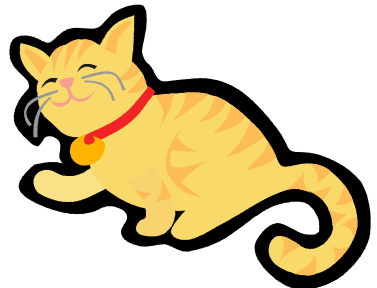
If you have MRSA you can still interact with others. Washing your hands and preventing them from coming in contact with your infections are the best ways to avoid spreading MRSA.

If your child has MRSA, it is okay to attend childcare or school as long as the wound is kept covered and dry. If your child is unable to keep the dressing intact, the child should stay home until the wound has healed or is no longer draining.



What about Pets and MRSA?

Dogs and cats can also get MRSA. Pets can have active infections or they can be carriers. If you see any signs of a skin infection on your pet, talk with your veterinarian about testing your pet. Pets with MRSA can be treated, you do not need to get rid of your pet. Do not touch your pet's infections and make sure to wear gloves when changing bandages.



Things to remember about living with MRSA:

1. Always wash your hands often, especially after using the bathroom and before preparing food.
2. Wear gloves if your hands may come in contact with body fluids such as urine or wound drainage.
3. Take good care of your skin.
4. Keep skin infections covered to avoid spreading MRSA to others.
5. Frequently clean touched areas of your home.
6. Inform all of your healthcare providers if you have been diagnosed with MRSA so they may take the appropriate precautions when caring for you.
7. Talk to your healthcare provider if you have any questions about your MRSA infection.



Shopping List

These items can be found at most drug stores or grocery stores.

- Disposable gloves
- Tissues
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Soap
- Disinfectant
- Bleach
- Plastic trash bags



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Web Sites

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

<http://www.cdc.gov/mrsa/index.html>

Washington State Department of Health

www.doh.wa.gov/topics/antibiotics/MRSA.htm

Your Local Health Department

<http://azdhs.gov/phs/oids/contacts.htm#>

Arizona Healthcare Associated Infections (HAI) Program

www.preventHAiaz.gov



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