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.

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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).

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 1960's 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 1990's, 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.

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 (called impetigo)

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. Because skin infections are more common, this booklet will focus on them.

How did 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 the 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 though proper cleaning methods. (Go to the section on "Caring for Yourself," beginning on page 9, to learn more about cleaning.)

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 doorknobs that have MRSA bacteria on the surface
- Being in crowded places where germs are easily spread, such as hospitals, nursing homes, child care centers 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.

There are two ways you can have MRSA:

1. You can have an active infection. An active infection means you have symptoms. The types of symptoms depend on where the bacteria are located. Usually an active infection is a skin infection, such as a boil, a sore or an infected cut.
2. You can be a carrier. If you are a carrier you do not have symptoms that you can see, but you still have MRSA bacteria living on your skin and in your nose. If you are a carrier, your health care provider may say that you are colonized. 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 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 skin infections, but you can spread MRSA to others. It is not fully understood why some people are carriers of MRSA, 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 infections, or touches something that came in contact with your infections (like a towel), that person could get MRSA.

If you are a MRSA carrier, you still 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 the liquid that comes out of your nose or mouth when you cough or sneeze.

Remember, if you have MRSA it is possible to spread it to family, friends, other people close to you, 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.

Is there a test for MRSA?

You would not usually be tested for MRSA unless you have an active infection. If you have a skin infection, your health care provider may take a sample of the fluid. This is called taking a culture. The lab will then test the bacteria to find out which antibiotic is best for you.

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

If I have MRSA, do I need to do anything special when I go to a clinic or hospital?

If you've ever had an active MRSA infection, or you are a carrier, tell all of your health care providers. They will wash their hands and may wear gloves when caring for you. They may also wear a gown to prevent getting the bacteria on their clothes. If you are coughing, they may wear a mask or ask you to wear one. They will always wear gloves when caring for a sore.

If you are staying in a hospital or a nursing home, a "Special Precautions" card may be put on the door of your room. This card alerts staff to use extra care to prevent the spread of MRSA. Your visitors may be instructed to avoid touching infected skin and take other precautions.

Will I need to wear a mask?

Your health care provider may wear a mask or ask you to wear one during visits.

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:

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.

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 okay. Some skin infections will heal after your health care provider has drained the pus out. You may not need an antibiotic.

2. 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.

3. 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 daily with antibacterial soap
- prescribe antibiotic pills
- prescribe antibiotic ointment to put in your nose for several days.

  Directions for putting ointment in your nose:

  1. Put 1/4 inch dab of ointment on a cotton swab (Q-tip)
  2. Insert the swab as far into your nose as you can tolerate
  3. Gently rub the swab on the inside of your nostril
  4. Using a new swab, repeat with the other nostril
  5. Dispose of the swabs
  6. Wash your hands

When should I seek medical care?

- If you have any new symptoms 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

Practice good hygiene

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

Does it matter how I wash my hands?

Yes. You have to wash carefully to get rid of the bacteria. Also, you can spread MRSA to people you live with if you share towels. Make sure you have your own hand towel to dry your hands on.

This is the hand washing method recommended by health care providers:

- Wet your hands first under warm running water.
- Apply soap and rub together for at least 15 seconds, getting between the fingers and around nails.
- Rinse with warm running water.
- Dry with a paper towel or hand towel.
- Turn the faucet off using a paper towel or hand towel (remember, your hands were dirty when you turned the faucet on).
- Throw the paper towel in the trash. If you are using a hand towel, do not share it with other people and wash it often.

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— this includes items soiled with body fluids, such as bedding
- after cleaning the bathroom, changing your bedding, and doing laundry
- after going to the bathroom
- after coughing or sneezing
- after touching things other people touch, such as phones, door knobs, or shopping carts

Ask your health care provider about the best kind of soap to use. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that you can buy in any drug store. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers will kill the bacteria within 15 seconds after you rub it on your hands. Your hands must be fairly clean for the sanitizer to work. Don't use the hand sanitizers to clean surfaces or objects. Look for a sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol in it.

Do I need to be careful when I do laundry?

Yes. Dirty clothes and bedding can spread MRSA bacteria.

- When collecting your laundry or changing your sheets, hold the dirty laundry away from your body and clothes. This will prevent getting any bacteria on your clothes.
- Wear disposable gloves to handle laundry that is soiled with body fluids, like drainage from a sore, urine or feces. Immediately put the laundry into the washer or into a plastic bag until it can be washed.
- Wash your laundry with warm or hot water. Use bleach if possible.
- Dry in a warm or hot dryer and make sure the clothes are completely dry.
- Wash your hands after handling dirty sheets or clothing and before handling clean laundry, even if you have been wearing gloves.
- Throw gloves away after taking them off. Do not reuse them.

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.

What about cleaning my house?

Use a disinfectant to regularly clean surfaces. Pay attention to items that are frequently touched — light switches, doorknobs, phones, toilets, sinks, tubs, kitchen counters, cell phones, pagers, and computer keyboards. Wipe the surface or object with the disinfectant and let it dry. If body fluids or pus get onto surfaces, you need to do the following:

1. Put on disposable gloves.
2. Wipe up the fluids with a paper towel.
3. Throw the paper towel in the trash.
4. Clean the surface thoroughly using disinfectant and a paper towel.
5. Throw the paper towel in the trash.
6. Then wipe the surface again with the disinfectant and let it dry for at least 30 seconds.
7. Throw the paper towel in the trash.
8. Remove your gloves and throw them in the trash.
9. Wash your hands or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Disinfectants to use

- Use any cleaner you can buy at the grocery store that has the word "disinfectant" on it. Remember to read the label and follow the directions.
- Make your own solution of bleach and water:
  Mix one tablespoon bleach into one quart of water in a spray bottle and label it "bleach solution." Make it fresh each time you plan to clean because the bleach evaporates out of the water making it less effective. Never mix bleach with other cleaners, especially ammonia. Keep the bleach solution away from children and don't put it in bottles that could be mistaken for something to drink.

How often should I clean?

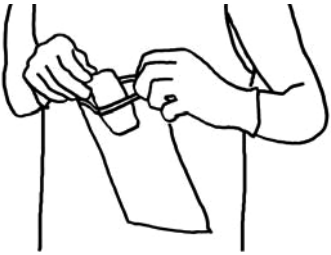
MRSA bacteria can live on surfaces for days, weeks and months. It is important to clean regularly. For items or surfaces you touch frequently, clean them every day.

How do I change my bandages?

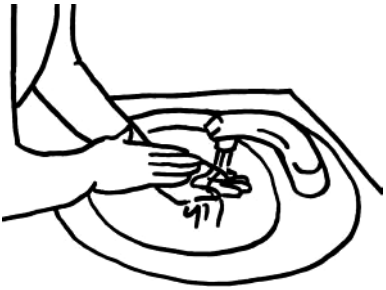
1. Wash your hands well with soap and warm water.

2. Put on disposable gloves.

3. Remove the old bandage.



4. Put the old bandage into a plastic bag. Take off the gloves and put them in the plastic bag, too.

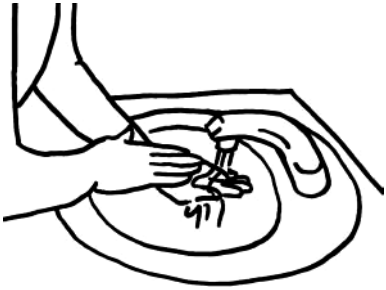


5. Wash and dry your hands.

6. Put on a new, clean pair of gloves.

7. Apply the new bandage. If you have a leaking sore, put extra dressings over it to keep the drainage from leaking through.

8. Take off the second pair of gloves and put them in the plastic bag. Seal or tie up the bag and throw it away in your regular trash.



5. Wash and dry your hands.

Personal care guidelines

- Wash your hands frequently.
- Carry alcohol-based hand gel with you so you can sanitize your hands if soap and water are not available.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in a wastebasket and wash your hands.
- Take a bath or shower every day. This will help reduce the amount of bacteria on your skin.
- Keep your fingernails short to keep the bacteria from growing under and on your nails.
- Change your sheets and towels regularly.
- Change your clothes daily and wash them before wearing again.
- Don't share razors, toothbrushes, or other personal items.
- Don't share any towels. Use a special hand towel. Mark it, or keep it in a separate place, so others won't use it.
- 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.
- Take care of yourself: eat right, exercise, quit smoking, and avoid stress.
- Get medical care at the first sign of infection in a cut, such as redness, swelling, pain or pus.
- Tell your health care providers that you have had MRSA in the past.
- If you work in a health care setting, you may need to take special precautions. Consult with your employer.

How do I stop MRSA from spreading when I have an active infection?

- Follow the "Personal care guidelines" on page 16.
- Do not poke or squeeze the sores.
- Do not touch sores, especially ones that cannot be covered with a bandage or clothing, such as sores on your face. If you do touch a sore, wash your hands immediately.
- Cover any infected sores with a bandage. Follow the steps under "How do I change my bandages?" on page 14. Wash your hands immediately after putting on the bandage.
- If you have a leaking sore, put extra dressings over it to keep the drainage from leaking through. Be careful not to get any pus or body fluids on surfaces or other people.
- Wear clothes that cover your bandages and sores, if possible.
- 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. If they get MRSA, it can make them very ill.
- Be careful if you are around someone who has a skin condition, such as eczema, or someone who just had surgery. They may be more likely to get an infection.
- If MRSA is in your urine or feces, clean your bathroom well. If other people handle your urine or feces, they should wear gloves and wash their hands well afterwards.
- Do not participate in contact sports until your sores have healed (sweating can cause a bandage to loosen and lead to contact with equipment and other people).
- Do not go to a public gym, sauna, hot tub or pool until sores have healed.
- Do not get manicures, massages or hair cuts until sores have healed.

How do I stop MRSA from spreading when I'm a carrier?

- Follow the "Personal care guidelines" on page 16.
- If you go to a gym, disinfect all equipment after using it. This is standard policy for gyms, and the gym should supply disinfectant.
- Shower well with soap before and after using a public sauna, hot tub or pool.
- Shower immediately after participating in sports or working out at the gym.
- Shower before any intimate skin-to-skin contact with another person. Showering will reduce the amount of bacteria on your skin and reduce the risk of spreading bacteria to the other person.

Children and MRSA

If you have MRSA and there are children in your life, you can still interact with them. Washing your hands and preventing children from coming in contact with your infections are the best ways to avoid spreading MRSA. Closely follow the "Personal care guidelines" on page 16, especially when children are present. Make sure children wash their hands, too.

If a child in your family has MRSA, teach the child what it means to have a contagious infection. Your child is likely to be in contact with other children. If your child is in child care, make a plan with the child care provider to reduce the risk of spreading MRSA to other children. If your child is in school, make a plan with the school nurse.

Pets and MRSA

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. You do not need to get rid of your pet.

If your pet is diagnosed with MRSA, then the "Personal care guidelines" on page 16 apply to your pet as well. Do not touch your pet's infections and make sure to wear gloves when changing bandages. Consider keeping children separated from the pet until its sores have healed.

Shopping list

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

- Disposable gloves
- Tissues
- Alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Antibacterial soap (if your health care provider recommends it)
- Disinfectant
- Bleach
- Plastic trash bags

Things to remember about living with MRSA:

1. Wash your hands often.
2. Take care of yourself: eat right, quit smoking, and avoid stress.
3. Take good care of your skin.
4. Keep skin infections covered to avoid spreading MRSA to others.
5. Talk to your health care provider if you have questions or concerns.

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