Frequently Asked Questions About MRSA

What is MRSA?
MRSA stands for methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus. Staphylococcus aureus bacteria, or "Staph", is a very common germ found on the skin and in the nose, which normally does not cause problems for most people. MRSA is a particular strain of Staph that is resistant to the broad spectrum of antibiotics commonly used to treat the infection. Older adults, young children and people with weakened immune systems are at the greatest risk for getting the infection, which can cause skin or wound infections, pneumonia, or infections of the blood.

What are the symptoms of MRSA?
Staph skin infections usually begin as small red bumps that resemble pimples, boils or spider bites. These can quickly turn into deep, painful abscesses that require surgical draining. Sometimes the bacteria remain confined to the skin, but it can also penetrate into the body, causing potentially life-threatening infections in bones, joints, surgical wounds, the bloodstream, heart valves and lungs.

Who is most likely to get an MRSA infection?
In the hospital, people most likely to get an MRSA infection are:

- People who have a weakened immune system
- Those who have been recently hospitalized or in a nursing home
- Patients who have been recently treated with antibiotics

People who are healthy and have not been hospitalized can also get MRSA due to skin abrasions and sharing towels or athletic equipment.

How is an MRSA infection contracted?
People who have MRSA germs on their skin or who are infected with MRSA can spread the germ to other people. Even a healthy person suffering no ill effects from MRSA can pass the germs on to someone else. MRSA can be passed on to anything a person comes in contact with such as clothes and bed linens, bed rails, countertops, bathroom fixtures and medical equipment. It can also be passed on by physicians, nurses and visitors, if they do not properly wash their hands.

Carefully and frequently wash your hands with soap and water by scrubbing them briskly for at least 15 seconds.
Apply hand sanitizer and rub hands together, covering all surfaces of hands and fingers, until hands are dry.

Can MRSA infections be treated?
MRSA can still be treated with certain kinds of antibiotics such as Vancomycin. Special laboratory testing can help doctors decide which antibiotic is most effective to treat an infection. It is possible that antibiotics may not be necessary for superficial abscesses. A physician may be able to drain an abscess caused by MRSA rather than treat the infection with drugs.

Can my friends and family get MRSA when they visit me?
To decrease the chance of getting MRSA, your family and friends should clean their hands before they enter your room and when they leave. Healthy family members are not at risk of getting infected with MRSA as long as everyone practices good hand washing. Ask a healthcare provider if family members need to wear protective gowns and gloves when they visit you.

What are some of the things that hospitals are doing to prevent MRSA infections?
The best way to prevent the spread of germs is for health care workers to wash their hands frequently and to properly disinfect hospital surfaces.

In the hospital, people who are infected or colonized with MRSA are placed in isolation to prevent the spread of MRSA. Visitors and health care workers caring for people in isolation may be required to wear protective garments and gloves and must follow strict hand-washing procedures.

Medical and hospital staff must:
- Carefully clean their hands with soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, before and after caring for every patient.
- Thoroughly clean hospital rooms and medical equipment.
- Use precautions when caring for patients with MRSA by putting on gloves and wearing a gown over their clothing. When leaving the room, health care providers and visitors must remove their gown and gloves and wash their hands.

What can I do to help prevent MRSA infections?
Here are some important steps to protect yourself, your family members and friends from health care associated infections.

In the hospital
- Make sure all hospital staff wash their hands or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer before touching you.
- Wash your own hands frequently.
- Make sure that intravenous tubes and catheters are inserted under sterile conditions. The health care provider inserting them must wear gloves and sterilize your skin.

When you go home
- If you have wounds, or an intravascular device such as a catheter or dialysis port, make sure that you know how to properly take care of it.
- Carefully and frequently wash your hands by scrubbing them briskly for at least 15 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (if hands are not visibly soiled). Wear gloves when touching infected skin or any item in contact with a draining wound and immediately wash hands after removing the gloves.
- Keep wounds clean and covered with sterile, dry bandages until they heal.
- Wash clothing and bedding frequently. Use hot water with added bleach, if possible and dry them in a hot dryer.
- Clean your room, personal items and non-cloth items that come in contact with the wound or drainage regularly with a commercial disinfectant or a fresh solution of one part bleach to 100 parts water (i.e. one tablespoon of bleach to one quart of water).

- Do not share personal items such as towels, razors, clothing, or bedding that touches the skin.
- Use antibiotics appropriately by taking all of the doses, even if the infection is getting better. Never share antibiotics, or save unfinished antibiotics for another time. Misuse of antibiotics contributes to resistance.
- Make sure to tell your health care providers that you have MRSA. This includes home health nurses and aides, therapists and personnel in doctors’ offices.

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