

Staphylococcus Infections/Signs and Symptoms/When to seek medical advice/Prevention/

You may be aware; recently there has been talk on the news about students who have become very ill from Staphylococcus (Staph) infections. Students should be informed about what a Staph infection is and how they can protect themselves.

Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) infection is caused by Staphylococcus aureus bacteria — often called "staph."

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.

Staph bacteria are generally harmless unless they enter the body through a cut or other wound, and even then they often cause only minor skin problems in healthy people. But in older adults and people who are ill or have weakened immune systems, ordinary staph infections can cause serious illness called methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus or MRSA.

Signs and symptoms

Staph infections, including MRSA, generally start 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 they can also burrow deep into the body, causing potentially life-threatening infections in bones, joints, surgical wounds, the bloodstream, heart valves and lungs.

Risk factors

These are the main risk factors for community-acquired (CA) MRSA:

- **Young age.** CA-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. Children and young adults are also much more likely to develop dangerous forms of pneumonia than older people are.
- **Participating in contact sports.** CA-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, CA-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 CA-MRSA infections.
- **Living in crowded or unsanitary conditions.** Outbreaks of CA-MRSA have occurred in military training camps and in American and European prisons.
- **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 antibiotic therapy. Drugs that treat ordinary staph aren't effective against MRSA, and their use could lead to serious illness and more resistant bacteria

Prevention

Preventing CA-MRSA

Protecting yourself from MRSA — which might be just about anywhere — may seem daunting, 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.** In or out of the hospital, 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.

Notify your parents of any sores or cuts that may appear infected (red, warm to the touch, purulent drainage). Purulent drainage is what is commonly known as pus. It may appear yellow, greenish, or may have an unpleasant odor. Be sure to inform your teacher, who should refer you the school nurse.