

# Patient Safety News

*A Quarterly Update*

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## MRSA and Patient Safety...The FACTS.

### *Frequently Asked Questions*

#### **Q. What is MRSA?**

Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) is a bacterium that causes infections in different parts of the body. It's tougher to treat than most strains of staphylococcus aureus—or staph—because it's resistant to some commonly used antibiotics. Garden-variety staph are common bacteria that can live on our bodies. Plenty of healthy people carry staph without being infected by it. In fact, 25–30% of us have staph bacteria in our noses.

But staph can be a problem if it manages to get into the body, often through a cut. Once there, it can cause an infection. Staph is one of the most common causes of skin infections in the U.S. Usually, these are minor and don't need special treatment. Less often, staph can cause serious problems like infected wounds or pneumonia.

Staph can usually be treated with antibiotics. But over the decades, some strains of staph—like MRSA—have become resistant to antibiotics that once destroyed it. MRSA was first discovered in 1961. It's now immune to methicillin, amoxicillin, penicillin, oxacillin, and many other antibiotics.

#### **Q. What type of infections does MRSA cause?**

In the community most MRSA infections are skin infections that may appear as pustules or boils which often are red, swollen, painful, or have pus or other drainage. These skin infections commonly occur at sites of visible skin trauma, such as cuts and abrasions, and areas of the body covered by hair (e.g., back of neck, groin, buttock, armpit, beard area of men).

Almost all MRSA skin infections can be effectively treated by drainage of pus with or without antibiotics. More serious infections, such as pneumonia, bloodstream infections, or bone infections, are very rare in healthy people who get MRSA skin infections.

#### **Q. How is MRSA transmitted?**

MRSA is usually transmitted by direct skin-to-skin contact or contact with shared items or surfaces that have come into contact with someone else's infection (e.g., towels, used bandages).

#### **Q. In what settings do MRSA skin infections occur?**

MRSA skin infections can occur anywhere.

Some settings have factors that make it easier for MRSA to be transmitted. Crowding, frequent skin-to-skin contact, compromised skin (i.e., cuts or abrasions), contaminated items and surfaces all contribute to the transmission of MRSA.

#### **Q. How do I protect myself from getting MRSA?**

- Practice good hygiene (e.g., keeping your hands clean by washing with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer and showering immediately after participating in exercise);
- Cover skin trauma such as abrasions or cuts with a clean dry bandage until healed;
- Avoid sharing personal items (e.g., towels, razors) that come into contact with your bare skin; and using a barrier (e.g., clothing or a towel) between your skin and shared equipment.
- Maintain a clean environment by establishing cleaning procedures for frequently touched surfaces and surfaces that come into direct contact with people's skin.



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