

## Should I Worry About MRSA?

You've probably heard about recent MRSA skin infections in schools. The good news is that serious MRSA infections are rare, and most infections can be treated easily. So what is MRSA and how can you protect yourself?

### What Is MRSA?

MRSA stands for **methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus***. *Staphylococcus aureus* is a type of bacteria with lots of different strains.

Many strains of staph bacteria are quite common. Most people have staph bacteria living on their skin or in their noses without causing any problems. If staph bacteria get into a person's body through a cut, scrape, or rash, they can cause minor skin infections. Most of these heal on their own if a person keeps the wound clean and bandaged. Sometimes doctors prescribe antibiotics to treat more stubborn staph infections.

What makes the MRSA different from other staph infections is that it has built up an immunity to the antibiotics doctors usually use to treat staph infections. (Methicillin is a type of antibiotic, which is why the strain is called "methicillin-resistant.")



## How Do People Get It?

MRSA is making headlines, but it's not a new infection. The first case was reported in 1968. In the past, MRSA usually affected people with weakened immune systems, such as those living in long-term care facilities like nursing homes.

But now some otherwise healthy people who are not considered at risk for MRSA are getting the infection. Doctors call this type of infection **community-associated MRSA (CA-MRSA)** because it affects people who spend time together in groups, such as schools, college dorms, or military barracks.

When lots of people come together and are likely to touch the same surfaces, have skin-to-skin contact, or share equipment that has not been cleaned, an infection can spread faster than it would otherwise. That's why recent MRSA infections involved athletes in gyms and locker rooms. If the MRSA bacteria get onto a kneepad, for example, and someone with a skinned knee wears the pad without cleaning it, that person's risk of infection is higher.

## How Can I Protect Myself?

MRSA may sound scary because it is resistant to some antibiotics. But it's actually easy to prevent MRSA from spreading by practicing simple cleanliness.

Protect yourself by taking these steps:

- Wash your hands often using plain soap and water for at least 15 seconds each time. You might also want to carry alcohol-based instant hand sanitizers or wipes in your bag for times when you can't wash your hands.
- If you have a cut or broken skin, keep it clean and covered with a bandage.
- Don't share razors, towels, uniforms, or other items that come into contact with bare skin.
- Clean shared sports equipment with antiseptic solution before each use or use a barrier (clothing or a towel) between your skin and the equipment.

Even in the rare event that someone in your school becomes infected with MRSA, you can protect yourself by washing your hands, wiping any surfaces before they come into contact with your skin, and keeping any cuts covered.

### **How Is MRSA Treated?**

MRSA infections can require different medications and approaches to treatment than other staph infections. For example, if a person has a skin abscess caused by MRSA, the doctor is more likely to have to drain the pus from the abscess in order to clear the infection.

In addition to draining the area, doctors may prescribe antibiotics for some people with MRSA infections. In a few cases, MRSA can spread throughout the body and cause problems like blood and joint infections — although complications like these are very rare in healthy people.

People with infections can also help prevent future bacteria from becoming resistant to antibiotics by taking the antibiotics that have been prescribed for them in the full amount until the prescription is finished (unless a doctor tells them it's OK to stop early). Germs that are allowed to hang around after incomplete treatment of an infection are more likely to become resistant to antibiotics.

### **When Should I Call the Doctor?**

Call the doctor if:

- You have an area of skin that is red, painful, swollen, and/or filled with pus.
- You have an area of swollen, painful skin and also feel feverish or sick.
- Skin infections seem to be passing from one family member to another (or among students in your school) or if two or more family members have skin infections at the same time.

Serious cases of MRSA are still rare. By taking these easy prevention steps, you can help keep it that way!

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