

Staph/MRSA Infections

What is *Staphylococcus aureus* (staph)?

Staphylococcus aureus, often referred to simply as "staph," are bacteria commonly carried on the skin or in the nose of healthy people. Approximately 25% to 30% of the population is colonized (when bacteria are present, but not causing an infection) in the nose with staph bacteria. Staph bacteria are one of the most common causes of skin infections in the United States. Most of these skin infections are minor (such as pimples and boils) and can be treated without antibiotics. However, staph bacteria also can cause serious infections (such as surgical wound infections, bloodstream infections, and pneumonia).

What is MRSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*)?

MRSA is a type of staph that is resistant to many common antibiotics. It used to occur primarily in hospitalized patients or healthcare workers, but is now commonly found in the Houston community. Factors that have been associated with the spread of MRSA skin infections include: close skin-to-skin contact, openings in the skin such as cuts or abrasions, contaminated items and surfaces, crowded living conditions, and poor hygiene.

How can I prevent staph or MRSA skin infections?

Practice good hygiene:

1. Keep your hands clean by washing thoroughly with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
2. Keep cuts and scrapes clean and covered with a bandage until healed.
3. Avoid contact with other people's wounds or bandages.
4. Avoid sharing personal items such as towels or razors.

Are staph and MRSA infections treatable?

Yes. Most staph and MRSA infections are treatable with antibiotics. If you are given an antibiotic, take all of the doses, even if the infection is getting better, unless your doctor tells you to stop taking it. Your doctor may also recommend warm soaks to the area. This involves soaking the area with warm water for at least 15 minutes at least three times a day. Do not share antibiotics with other people or save unfinished antibiotics to use at another time. However, many staph skin infections must be treated by draining the abscess or boil. Drainage of skin boils or abscesses should only be done by a healthcare provider.

If after visiting your healthcare provider watch for increasing size, increasing redness, spreading borders, fever, streaks coming from the area, or any signs of feeling ill. If any of these symptoms occur, call your physician's office. If other people you know or live with get the same infection tell them to go to their healthcare provider.

If I have a staph, or MRSA skin infection, what can I do to prevent others from getting infected?

You can prevent spreading staph or MRSA skin infections to others by following these steps:

1. **Cover your wound.** Keep wounds that are draining or have pus covered with clean, dry bandages. Follow your healthcare provider's instructions on proper care of the wound. Pus from infected wounds can contain staph and MRSA, so keeping the infection covered will help prevent the spread to others. Bandages or tape can be discarded with the regular trash.
2. **Clean your hands.** You, your family, and others in close contact should wash their hands frequently with soap and warm water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, especially after changing the bandage or touching the infected wound.
3. **Do not share personal items.** Avoid sharing personal items such as towels, washcloths, razors, clothing, or uniforms that may have had contact with the infected wound or bandage. Wash sheets, towels, and clothes that become soiled with water and laundry detergent. Drying clothes in a hot dryer, rather than air-drying, also helps kill bacteria in clothes.
4. **Talk to your doctor.** Tell any healthcare providers who treat you that you have or had a staph or MRSA skin infection.

How do you treat recurrent MRSA infections?

Sometimes MRSA can keep on spreading in a family from person to person, or the same person will get repeated MRSA infections. If this happens, your doctor may direct you to take some of the following steps:

1. **“Swimming pool” bath:** Add ½ cup Clorox bleach to bath water (bathtub ½ full) twice a week for four weeks. This gives as much chlorine as is in a typical swimming pool.
2. **Bactroban:** Apply bactroban (mupirocin) ointment, a prescription medication, inside each nostril with a cotton swab twice a day for one month.