

By Clinton L. Kelly

Staphylococcus aureus, often referred to simply as "staph," is a type of bacteria commonly carried on the skin or in the noses of healthy people. Sometimes, staph can cause an infection. Staph bacteria are one of the most common causes of skin infections. The number of staph infections is rising in the United States, particularly in hospitals. Fortunately, most staph infections are minor (such as pustules and

not been recently (within the past year) hospitalized or had a medical procedure (such as dialysis, surgery, catheters) are known as community-associated MRSA infections ("CA MRSA"). Staph or MRSA infections in the community are usually manifested as skin infections that look like pimples or boils and occur in otherwise healthy people. There is also a concern for exposure to MRSA in the workplace. MRSA is transmitted most frequently by direct skin-to-skin

cuts or abrasions), Contaminated items and surfaces, and lack of Cleanliness. Locations where the 5 C's are common include schools, dormitories, military barracks, households, correctional facilities, and daycare centers.

If you have MRSA, can you go to work? Unless directed by a healthcare provider, workers with MRSA infections should not be routinely excluded from going to work. Exclusion from work should be reserved for those

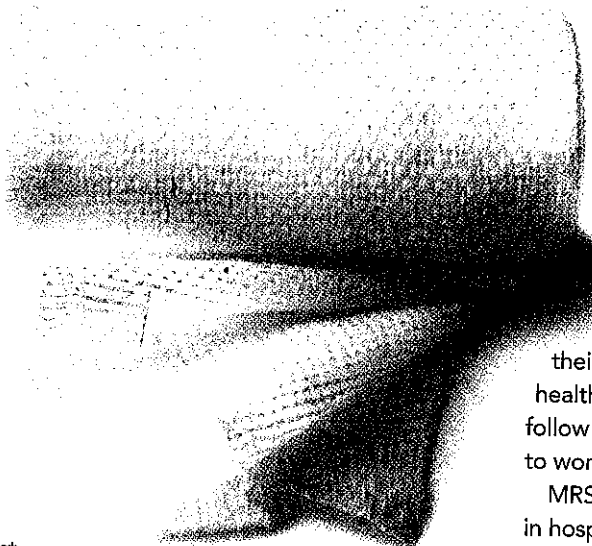
Staph & MRSA Infections

SAFETY TIPS IN VARIOUS SETTINGS

boils) and can be treated without antibiotics. However, staph bacteria also can cause serious, life-threatening infections.

Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) refers to types of staph that are resistant to the antibiotic methicillin. MRSA is often resistant to other antibiotics. While 25% to 30% of the population is colonized with staph (meaning that bacteria are present, but not causing an infection with staph), approximately 1% is colonized with MRSA. Staph infections, including MRSA, occur most frequently among persons in hospitals and healthcare facilities (such as nursing homes and dialysis centers) who have weakened immune systems. These healthcare-associated staph infections include surgical wound infections, urinary tract infections, bloodstream infections, and pneumonia.

Staph and MRSA can also cause illness in persons outside of hospitals and healthcare facilities. MRSA infections that are acquired by persons who have



contact or contact with shared items or surfaces that have come into contact with someone else's infection at work (e.g., towels, used bandages).

MRSA skin infections can occur anywhere. However, some settings have factors that make it easier for MRSA to be transmitted. These factors, referred to as the 5 C's, are as follows: Crowding, frequent skin-to-skin Contact, Compromised skin (i.e.,

with wound drainage ("pus") that cannot be covered and contained with a clean, dry bandage and for those who cannot maintain good hygiene. Workers with active infections should be excluded from activities where skin-to-skin contact with the affected skin area is likely to occur until their infections are healed. See your healthcare provider immediately and follow his or her advice about returning to work.

MRSA infections occur most often in hospital patients, nursing home residents, or dialysis patients. They usually have weakened immune systems, chronic diseases, or have indwelling devices such as IV lines or tracheotomies. This type of MRSA infection is caused by healthcare associated MRSA (HA MRSA), which usually causes surgical wound infections, bloodstream infections, and pneumonia. Community Associated MRSA (CA MRSA) infections involve strains of MRSA that can cause infections in healthy persons who have not been patients in health care



facilities. CA MRSA usually causes skin infections such as pimples and boils but occasionally causes more serious infections. Some patients may think they have spider bites in the early phase of these infections.

Anyone can acquire CA MRSA infections, but many cases have been found in athletes, military recruits, prisoners, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, Alaskan Natives, and children. Factors that seem to increase the chances of acquiring an infection with CA MRSA are close skin-to-skin contact, cuts, cracks, or abrasions in the skin, crowded living conditions, and poor hygiene.

Treatment of CA MRSA infections depends on the severity of the infection. Many skin infections can be cured with simple drainage of abscesses or pimples without the need for antibiotics. More

serious infections may need oral, or rarely, intravenous antibiotic treatment. Your health care provider will be able to determine the best course of treatment for your condition. It is very important to follow the instructions from your health care provider. Your cooperation in treating the infection will help you to get healthy as quickly as possible.

If you have MRSA, how contagious are you? It depends on whether you are simply colonized or have an active infection. Being colonized with MRSA means you carry it in your nose or on your skin but you are not sick with a MRSA infection. If you have signs and symptoms of a MRSA infection (boil, abscess, pain, swelling), you are much more likely to spread MRSA because the infected area contains many MRSA germs. That is why it is important to

keep the area of the wound covered and to wash your hands after touching the wound.

In the age of cost cuts in health care and increased patient admissions to the hospital as "ObamaCare" becomes law, the infection rate is expected to grow even more. This is why greater attention to cleanliness and washing hands before eating is now mandatory, not discretionary. Vigilance and prevention are the safeguards against staph and MRSA infections. Be wary of your environment. Visit your health care provider immediately if you suspect an infection. Always take this infection seriously at home and at work. It could make the difference between life and death.

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