

# Learning about MRSA

(Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*): A guide for patients

## About MRSA

### What is MRSA and why is it so serious?

Staphylococci or “staph” bacteria commonly live on the skin and in the nose. Usually, staph bacteria don’t cause any harm. However, if they get inside the body they can cause an infection. When common antibiotics don’t kill the staph bacteria, it means the bacteria have become resistant to those antibiotics. This type of staph is called MRSA (Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*).

MRSA was first identified in the 1960’s and was mainly found in hospitals and nursing homes. In the late 1990’s, a new type of MRSA was identified. This type of MRSA is becoming more common among children and adults who do not have medical conditions.

### What does MRSA look like?

Most often, MRSA causes infections on the skin. These infections may look like any one of the following:

- Large, red, painful bumps under the skin (called boils or abscesses)
- A cut that is swollen, hot and filled with pus
- Blisters filled with pus (called impetigo)
- Sores that look and feel like spider bites (However, MRSA is not caused by a spider bite or any other insect bite.)

It is also possible to have MRSA in other areas of the body, such as blood, lungs, joints, eyes, and urine. These types of infections are less common, although they can be more serious. Because skin infections are the most common, this booklet will focus on them.



Infectious Disease Epidemiology, Prevention and Control  
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[www.lakareol.com](http://www.lakareol.com)

## MRSA Transmission

### How did I get MRSA?

Anyone can get MRSA. You can get MRSA by touching someone or something that has the bacteria on it and then touching your skin or your nose.

Some ways that you could get MRSA:

- Touching the infected skin of someone who has MRSA
- Using personal items of someone who has MRSA, such as towels, wash cloths, clothes or athletic equipment
- Touching objects, such as public phones or doorknobs, that have MRSA bacteria on the surface and then touching your nose or an open sore, paper cut, etc.

You may increase your chances of getting MRSA if:

- You take antibiotics a lot
- You take antibiotics without a prescription
- You don’t follow your doctor’s directions when taking antibiotics (for example you stop taking your antibiotics before finishing a prescription or you skip doses)
- You frequently get cuts or scrapes on your skin (Your skin serves as a barrier to infection. When the skin gets damaged staph bacteria can enter and increase your risk for infection.)

There are two ways you can have MRSA.

1. You can have an active infection.  
An active infection means you have symptoms. This is usually a boil, a sore, or an infected cut that is red, swollen, or pus-filled.  
You can be a carrier.
2. If you are a carrier you do not have symptoms that you can see, but you still have MRSA bacteria living in your nose or on your skin. If you are a carrier, your doctor may say that you are colonized. These words - “carrier” and “colonized” - mean the same thing.

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## MRSA Diagnosis

### Will I always have MRSA?

Many people with active infections are treated effectively, and no longer have MRSA.

However, sometimes MRSA goes away after treatment and comes back several times. If MRSA infections keep coming back again and again, your doctor can help you figure out the reasons you keep getting them.

### If I have MRSA, do I need to do anything special when I go to a clinic or hospital?

If you have ever had an active MRSA infection or you are a carrier, you should tell your health care providers. They will wash their hands and wear gloves when caring for you. They may also wear a gown over their clothes and may wear a mask.

If you are staying in a hospital or nursing home, a “Special Precautions” card may be put on the door of your room. This card alerts staff to use extra care to prevent the spread of MRSA. Your visitors may be instructed to avoid touching infected skin and to take other precautions such as wearing gloves or gowns when visiting you.

### Is there a test for MRSA?

You would not usually be tested for MRSA unless you have an active infection. If you have a skin infection, your doctor may take a sample of the area to find out what bacteria is causing your infection. This is called taking a culture. The lab will then test the bacteria to find out which antibiotic is best for you.

If your MRSA infections keep coming back again and again, your doctor may test you and your family members to see if you are carriers. In this case, the doctor would take a culture from the nose or other areas where MRSA can be found.

## Treating MRSA

### How is MRSA treated?

MRSA should always be treated by a doctor. It is important to follow the instructions for treatment that your doctor gives you.

If you have an active MRSA infection, your doctor may choose one or more of the following treatments:

1. Give antibiotics
2. Drain the infection
3. Reduce the amount of staph on your skin and in your nose

#### 1. Give antibiotics

MRSA is resistant to many antibiotics so it can be difficult to treat. However, there are antibiotics that can treat MRSA and make the infection go away. Your doctor may culture your infection and have the lab test the bacteria to find out which antibiotic is best for you. If your doctor gives you antibiotics, take them exactly as prescribed. Do not stop early, even if you feel better or if your infection looks healed. The last few pills kill the toughest germs. Never take antibiotics without a prescription from your doctor.

#### If your provider gives you antibiotics:

Take them exactly as prescribed. Do not stop early, even if you feel better. The last few pills kill the toughest germs.



#### 2. Drain the infection

Don't do this yourself. It is very dangerous to squeeze or poke a skin infection because it can push the bacteria deeper into the skin and make the infection much worse. Your doctor will open the sore and drain it. After the infection is drained, you must keep it covered with a clean, dry bandage, until it heals

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## 3. Reduce the amount of staph on your skin or in your nose

This may prevent the spread of MRSA if you have an active infection or if you are a carrier.

To decrease the amount of staph on your body your doctor may, for a short period of time:

- Tell you to shower daily with antibacterial soap
- Prescribe antibiotic ointment to put in your nose for several days
- Prescribe antibiotic pills (in some cases)

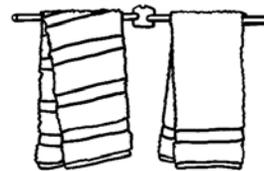
## Preventing the Spread of MRSA

### What can I do to prevent spreading my infection to others?

- Clean your hands often with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Take a bath or shower often, be sure to use soap to clean your body while showering or bathing
- Wash your sheets and towels at least once a week
- Change your clothes daily and wash them before wearing again
- Do not share towels, wash cloths, razors, or other personal items
- If you get a cut or scrape on your skin, clean it with soap and water and then cover it with a bandage
- Do not touch sores; if you do touch a sore, clean your hands right away
- Cover any infected sores with a bandage and clean your hands right away after putting on the bandage
- Wear clothes that cover your bandages and sores, if possible
- Clean frequently used areas of your home (bathrooms, countertops, etc.) daily with a household cleaner
- Do not participate in contact sports until your sores have healed
- Do not go to a public gym, sauna, hot tub or pool until sores have healed

### Don't share any towels.

Use a special towel. Mark it or keep it in a separate place so others won't use it.



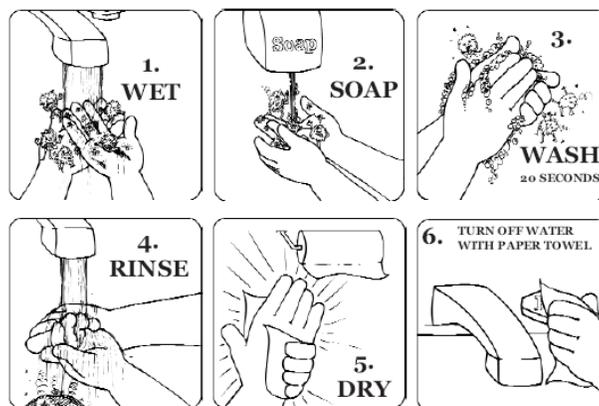
### Contact your doctor if:

- you have any new symptoms during or after treatment for a MRSA skin infection such as a new fever or a fever that won't go away
- the infection gets worse
- the infection is not healing
- the infection comes back
- you have questions

## Caring for Yourself

### Does it matter how I wash my hands?

Yes. You have to rub your hands for at least 20 seconds to get rid of the bacteria. Follow these instructions:



### How do I clean my hands with alcohol-based hand sanitizer?

Use enough to cover all the surfaces of your hands.



Images adapted with permission from the Washington State Department of Health.

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## Laundry

### Do I need to be careful when I do laundry?

Yes. Dirty clothes and bedding can spread MRSA bacteria.

- When touching your laundry or changing your sheets, hold the dirty laundry away from your body and clothes to prevent bacteria from getting on your clothes
- Wear disposable gloves to touch laundry that is soiled with body fluids, like drainage from a sore, urine or feces
- Immediately put the laundry into the washer or into a plastic bag until it can be washed
- Wash your laundry with warm or hot water, use bleach if possible
- Dry in a warm or hot dryer and make sure the clothes are completely dry
- Clean your hands after touching dirty sheets or clothing and before touching clean laundry, even if you have been wearing gloves
- Throw gloves away after taking them off (do not reuse them) and clean your hands

### How often should I change clothes and bedding?

- Change your sheets and towels at least once a week
- Change your clothes daily
- Do not put dirty clothes or clothes you have just worn back in your closet or drawers until they have been washed



## Cleaning

### What about cleaning my house?

- Use a household disinfectant or bleach solution to clean surfaces daily
- Pay attention to items that are frequently touched - light switches, doorknobs, phones, toilets, sinks, tubs and showers and kitchen counters
- Wipe the surface or object with the disinfectant and let it dry

### Disinfectants to use:

- You can use any cleaner you buy at the grocery store that has the word “disinfectant” on it, remember to read the label and follow the directions
- Make your own solution of bleach and water:
  - Mix two teaspoons bleach into one quart of water in a spray bottle and label it “bleach solution”
  - Make it fresh each time you plan to clean because the bleach evaporates out of the water making it less effective
  - Never mix bleach with other cleaners, especially ammonia
  - Keep the bleach solution away from children and don't put it in bottles that could be mistaken for something to drink

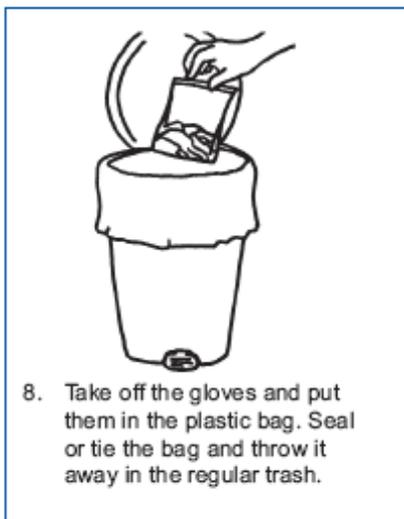
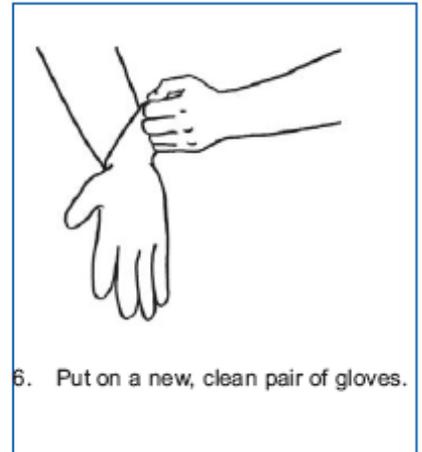
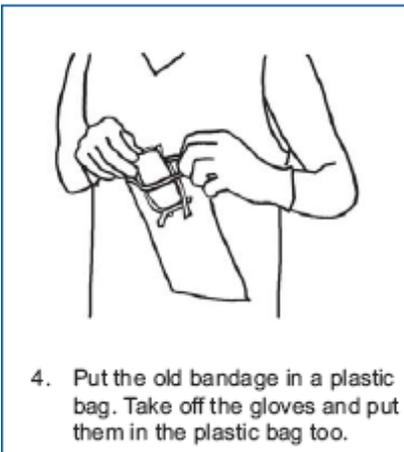
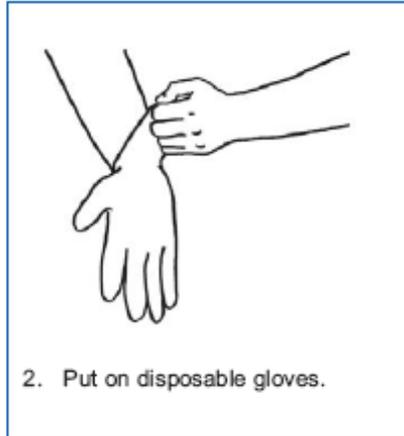
### How often should I clean?

It is important that you clean daily. Especially items or surfaces you touch often.



## Changing Bandages

### How do I change my bandages?



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### **Important Note:**

MRSA can cause serious infections that can become life-threatening if left untreated. If you or someone in your family has been diagnosed with MRSA, there are steps you should take to avoid spreading it to your family and friends.

Follow the recommendations and practice good hygiene to take care of yourself. MRSA may cause physical pain and emotional stress, but keep in mind that it can be managed.

### **Things to remember about having MRSA:**

- Clean your hands often
- Take care of yourself: eat right, exercise, quit smoking, and avoid stress
- Take good care of your skin
- Keep skin infections covered to avoid spreading MRSA to others
- Talk with your doctor if you have questions or concerns

### **Web sites:**

Minnesota Department of Health  
[www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/mrsa/](http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/mrsa/)

Minnesota Antibiotic Resistance Collaborative  
[www.minnesotaarc.org](http://www.minnesotaarc.org)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)  
[www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/ar\\_mrsa\\_ca.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/ar_mrsa_ca.html)

This fact sheet was adapted from the Living with MRSA booklet produced by the Minnesota Department of Health and the Minnesota Antibiotic Resistance Collaborative adapted from a booklet created by the Washington State Department of Health, the Tacoma/Pierce County Health Department and the GroupHealth Cooperative.