MRSA — Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus

For Consumers
A Quick Reference Sheet from the Alliance for the Prudent Use of Antibiotics

Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA)

Staphylococcus aureus is a type of bacteria that lives on the skin of 25%-30% of the population. Most of the time, it doesn’t cause problems, but if it enters the bloodstream through a break in the skin, it can cause a “staph infection.” MRSA is a specific type of staph infection, and the symptoms it causes are the same as the symptoms seen in other staph infections of the skin. About 2% of the population carries MRSA. The difference between MRSA and other forms of staph is that MRSA has become resistant to many kinds of antibiotics, making it more difficult to treat. It may also produce dangerous toxins.

How do I know if I have MRSA?

Infections by Staphylococcus aureus, including MRSA, appear as bumps or inflamed areas on the skin. Look for skin that is:

- red
- swollen
- painful
- accompanied by fever
- warm to the touch
- full of pus or other drainage

If you have a cut or pimple that doesn’t seem to be healing, call your doctor or health care provider. A laboratory test will determine if you have MRSA and need antibiotics.

Based on CDC guidelines

I keep hearing about “community-acquired” and “hospital-acquired” MRSA. What do those terms mean?

MRSA infections contracted in the hospital are often caused by a slightly different type of staph bacteria than infections picked up in the community (e.g., at sports practice or day care). Because the bacteria are different, the symptoms of the infections are different too. “Hospital-acquired” MRSA is generally associated with pneumonia, surgical site infections, and bloodstream infections. “Community-acquired” MRSA tends to begin with skin infections such as pimples or boils. Skin abrasions and cuts from sports injuries may develop redness, warmth, swelling, pus, and pain. Infections can also occur at areas that are covered with body hair or are irritated from uniforms and equipment.

Is there a treatment for MRSA?

MRSA is treatable. If the treatment your doctor prescribes doesn’t seem to be working, call and ask for advice. You can also ask your doctor if he or she has tested to see what antibiotics your MRSA will respond to.
How can I avoid getting an MRSA infection?

- The most important thing you can do to protect yourself from MRSA is to wash your hands. Good handwashing requires washing to a lather with soap and water for 15-20 seconds. If you don’t have access to soap and water when washing your hands, choose an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

- MRSA can enter the body through small cuts and cracks in the skin’s surface, so take steps to keep your hands from getting dry and cracked.

- Keep cuts and scrapes clean and covered until they are healed, especially during sports practice or when working out.

- Do not share personal items like towels, razors, and washcloths.

- Disinfect surfaces that are touched frequently.

- Protect yourself at the gym or sports practice by wiping down the surfaces of workout equipment with disinfecting wipes and always showering after working out.

- If you are in the hospital receiving surgery, politely ask people who come into your room to wash their hands or clean them with alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

You may be at higher risk for MRSA if:
• You or a member of your family was recently in the hospital
• You have had an invasive medical device such as a catheter or intravenous line
• You reside in a long-term care facility
• You participate in contact sports
• You spend time in crowded or unsanitary conditions such as a military barracks
• You are a man having sex with men
• You or someone in your family has previously had MRSA

*Risk factors adapted from Mayo Clinic MRSA risk factors.

References:
For more information on MRSA and how to protect yourself from infection visit: http://www.cdc.gov/mrsa/mrsa_initiative/skin_infection/index.html

Fact Sheet based on the APUA report Healthy Families, Healthy Homes: Things you can do to create a healthy household environment. Report can be accessed at: http://www.tufts.edu/med/apua/consumers/healthy_families.shtml

Established in 1981, the Alliance for the Prudent Use of Antibiotics (APUA) is an international non-governmental organization dedicated to preserving the effectiveness of antibiotics and other antimicrobials.

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