Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA)

This information explains methicillin resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), including how it spreads and how infections are treated.

What is methicillin resistant Staphylococcus aureus?

Staphylococcus (staph) is a type of bacteria that naturally exist in the environment, including on people's skin. Methicillin resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) is a type of staph bacteria that is resistant to certain antibiotics. This means that some treatments won't work or may be less effective.

MRSA can cause many illnesses, including:

- Urinary tract infections (UTIs)
- Pneumonia
- Blood infections
- Wound or skin infections

What is the difference between being colonized and being infected with MRSA?

A person can be either colonized or infected with MRSA. If a person is colonized, it means that the bacteria is present on their skin or in their body, but they have no symptoms. If a person is infected, it means that the bacteria is present on their skin or in their body and it's causing symptoms.

How does MRSA spread?

Most MRSA infections are spread by direct contact with an infected person's bodily fluids, such as blood, drainage from a wound, urine (pee), bowel movements (poop, or sputum (phlegm). It can also be spread by touching equipment or surfaces that have come in contact with the bacteria. Casual contact, such as touching or hugging, doesn't spread MRSA.

Who is at risk for a MRSA infection?

You're more likely to get a MRSA infection if you:

- Are older.
- Have weakened immune systems.
- Have chronic illnesses, such as cancer or diabetes.
- Have been treated with antibiotics in the past.
- Have had a recent surgery.
- Have had repeated or long hospital stays.
- Have open wounds or sores.
- Have tubes or drains in the body.

What are the symptoms of a MRSA infection?

Your symptoms will depend on where the infection is and what type of infection you have.

How is a MRSA infection treated?

MRSA infections are treated with antibiotics that are not resistant to the bacteria.

What isolation precautions are taken in the hospital if I have a MRSA infection?

Isolation precautions are steps we take to stop infections from spreading from person to person. If you're diagnosed with or exposed to a MRSA infection while you're in the hospital:

- You will be placed in a private room.
- A sign will be posted on your door telling all staff to clean their hands. They can use soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer before going into and after leaving your room.
- All staff who enter your room must wear a yellow gown and gloves. These are available outside of your room and can be disposed of inside your room.
- If you leave your room for tests, you must wear a yellow gown and gloves or be covered with a clean sheet.
- If you leave your room to walk around the unit, you must wear a yellow gown and gloves.
- You will not be able to go to these areas of the hospital:
    - Pantry on your unit
    - Pediatric recreation areas on M9
    - Cafeteria
    - Main lobby
    - Any other public area of the hospital

Your healthcare provider will let you know when you can stop following these precautions. This will be after you're treated and no longer have symptoms.

What precautions should I take at home if I have a MRSA infection?

Be sure to do the following at home:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after using the bathroom.
- Wash your hands after having contact with blood, urine, or drainage from a wound.
- Use a disinfectant (such as Clorox® or Lysol®) to wipe any surface that may have been contaminated with the germ, such as your doorknob.

Where can I get more information about MRSA?

If you have any questions, talk with your healthcare provider. You can also visit these websites for more information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/mrsa

New York State Department of Health
www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/staphylococcus_aureus/methicillin_resistant

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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