

MRSA Information from Student Health Services

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Overview of MRSA

Recently there has been much publicity in the press about MRSA (methicilin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*). We want to provide you with some general information about this bacterial infection and help you identify ways to decrease your chances of developing this infection.

MRSA is one of several types of bacterial infections that are resistant to antibiotic therapy. These strains of bacteria, often referred to as “super bugs” are not easily killed by commonly used antibiotics. Recently the medical community has worried that the overuse and misuse of antibiotics, especial in children, has given rise to these strains of drug-resistant bacterias.

Here is what the American Academy of Family Physicians has been saying about MRSA.

A specific strain of the common bacteria *Staphylococcus aureus*, MRSA causes a type of “staph” infection that's been cropping up among otherwise healthy people as skin infections, such as abscesses. Staph bacteria live on most people's skin or in their noses without causing any problems. But a staph infection can happen when the germ enters the body through broken skin such as a cut, scrape, or rash.

Staph is the usual suspect in many skin infections. Staph infections, including those caused by MRSA, usually begin as red bumps resembling boils or pimples (people sometimes mistake them for spider bites). The bumps often become swollen, painful, and filled with pus.

Most staph skin infections are often minor and can be remedied by regularly washing and bandaging the area and/or using oral antibiotics or antibiotic ointments. Sometimes the abscesses from staph need to be drained by a doctor.

But MRSA can't be treated with antibiotics that are routinely given, such as methicillin, penicillin, and amoxicillin. Doctors now have turn to other medications to try to treat MRSA. And, if the infection spreads to other parts of the body, MRSA may lead to serious complications like pneumonia and blood and joint infections.

Although MRSA has been making headlines recently, it's not a new infection — the first case was reported in 1968. The difference is that now, MRSA is affecting more people outside of

hospitals. MRSA used to be seen only in those with weakened immune systems — chronically ill people who'd been hospitalized for a long time or had surgery, those receiving long courses of antibiotic therapy, or people living in long-term care facilities like nursing homes or prisons.

But now an alarming number of otherwise healthy people who are not considered at risk for MRSA are getting the infection. Called community-associated MRSA (or CA-MRSA), this type of staph infection has been found most recently in a few high school and professional sports teams. The bug can be passed to athletes via gyms and locker rooms and through shared equipment or skin-to-skin contact (e.g., wrestling and football). Kids in child-care settings may also be at risk.

How to Protect Yourself

Staph infections can spread through the air and to other people or other parts of your body via contaminated surfaces or on dirty hands or fingernails. To help keep the super bug at bay:

- Wash your hands well and often. Do not use antibacterial soap unless directed to do so by your health care provider.
- Use alcohol-based instant hand sanitizers such as Purell when soap and water is not available
- Keep any broken skin clean and covered with a bandage.
- Don't share razors or towels.
- Make sure shared sports equipment is cleaned with antiseptic solution before each use.

Come to Health Services if:

- You have an area of skin that's red, painful, swollen, and/or filled with pus
- You have inflamed skin and are also feverish or feel sick
- skin infections seem to be passing from one person to another or if two or more close contacts have skin infections at the same time

Serious cases of MRSA are still relatively rare, but an ounce of prevention can go a long way toward avoiding the infection and keeping you healthy.