

Virginia Department of Health
Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA)

Questions and Answers

What is MRSA?

Staphylococcus aureus (“staph”) is a common type of bacteria (germ) that is often found on the skin and in the nose of healthy people. It can also grow in wounds or other sites in the body, sometimes causing an infection. For example, staph is one of the most common causes of skin infections. Penicillin is a drug that was once commonly used to treat staph infections. However, over time many staph bacteria have become difficult to treat with penicillin and antibiotics related to penicillin. These new or resistant forms of *Staphylococcus aureus* are called methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA. The illnesses they cause are the same as those caused by other staph; the difference is in how they are treated.

Who is at risk for getting these organisms?

Just like normal staph bacteria, MRSA normally does not cause disease unless it enters an opening in the skin. However, some people are at higher risk for carrying MRSA or becoming infected with this type of staph. MRSA more often occurs in people in hospitals and healthcare facilities. It can also occur outside the hospital in people who receive multiple antibiotics, as well as in people who have close contact with a person carrying the germ or by touching objects contaminated with MRSA (e.g., clothes, towels, bedding, athletic equipment, benches in saunas or hot tubs, bandages).

How are MRSA and other staph spread?

Staph bacteria (including MRSA) are most often spread by close contact with infected people or the things they touch. It is not spread through the air.

What are the symptoms of infection?

Many people carry staph bacteria on their skin without any symptoms. Symptoms of a MRSA or other staph infection depend on where the infection is located. Infections of the skin are the most common, and cause symptoms such as redness, warmth, pus and a wound that does not heal. Your doctor may refer to these infections as boils, furuncles, impetigo, or abscesses. Infections can also develop in the blood, bone, bladder, lungs, and other sites. Symptoms there will depend on the site of infection, but include fever and pain at the site.

What should I do if I think I have a MRSA or other staph infection?

See your healthcare provider.

Are MRSA and other staph infections treatable?

Yes. Some staph skin infections can be treated simply by draining the sore and keeping the wound clean. For more serious infections, antibiotics can be used to treat those infections. If antibiotics are prescribed by your healthcare provider, it is very important to finish taking all the pills and to call your doctor if the infection does not get better.

What can I do to prevent MRSA and other staph infections?

- Wash your hands often, especially when you’re exposed to someone with an infection or when you touch objects that may be contaminated.
- Keep cuts and scrapes clean and covered.
- Avoid sharing personal items such as towels, sports equipment, razors, etc.
- If a sore or cut becomes red, oozes, causes pain or isn’t healing, see a doctor.
- Don’t insist on antibiotics for colds or other viruses.
- If prescribed antibiotics, take all the pills, even if you feel better before they are all gone.

