

## **MRSA Frequently Asked Questions**

### ***What is MRSA?***

MRSA stands for “methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*.” MRSA (often pronounced “mersa”) is caused by a bacterium, *Staphylococcus aureus*, commonly referred to as “staph” that is resistant to certain types of antibiotics. “Methicillin-resistant” means, specifically, that it is resistant to antibiotics in the “beta-lactam” antibiotic family, including methicillin, oxacillin, penicillin, and amoxicillin. MRSA is often resistant to other types of antibiotics as well.

Since MRSA is a type of staph infection, it is helpful to first understand staph.

### ***What is Staph?***

*Staphylococcus aureus* or “staph” (pronounced “staff”) are common bacteria. About 25-30% of all healthy people carry staph around on their body (this is referred to “colonization”), usually on their skin or in their nose. Staph is also commonly found in the environment such as surfaces that have come into contact with the bacteria. Most people who are colonized with staph carry the staph around and never become sick. This isn’t considered to be an “infection” since the person did not experience any symptoms. However, staph can cause infections, usually skin infections, most of which are not serious. Sometimes staph can cause serious illness, especially when the infection occurs in the blood, bones, lungs, or other internal organs.

### ***How do people get infected with Staph or MRSA, and how is the infection spread?***

Most people get infected with staph and MRSA by direct (skin to skin) contact with someone who either has an infection or who is colonized with the bacteria. Contact can also be indirect, by coming into contact with items that have been contaminated through direct contact with the skin of someone who is infected, such as towels or shared athletic equipment. Since staph and MRSA are common in hospitals, the more serious infections usually (but not always) occur in very ill or hospitalized people rather than in healthy, non-hospitalized persons.

Most often, infection with staph or MRSA requires some damage or injury to the skin, such as a cut, scrape, or puncture. People who are already colonized with staph or MRSA can get an infection at the location of such skin injury, even if the item that caused the injury was not infected, because the staph or MRSA was already living on their skin. That is why it’s so important to immediately wash any cuts or scrapes, and keep them clean and covered with a bandage.

### ***What does a staph or MRSA infection look like?***

Staph bacteria, including MRSA, can cause skin infections that may look like one or more pimples or boils or “bug-bites” or crusty sores (impetigo), and can be itchy, red, swollen, painful, or have pus or other drainage. Sometimes, more serious infections may cause pneumonia, bloodstream infections, or surgical wound infections.

### ***How do I prevent getting infected?***

- The best way to prevent a MRSA infection is to keep your hands clean by washing them frequently with soap and warm water or hand sanitizer, and especially after direct contact with another person’s skin.
- Keep cuts and scrapes clean and covered with a bandage until they have healed.
- Avoid contact with other people’s wounds or bandages.
- Avoid sharing personal items such as towels, washcloths, toothbrushes, razors, and personal care products such as lotions or ointments. Sharing these items may transfer staph from one person to another.
- Keep your skin healthy, and avoid getting dry, cracked skin, especially during the winter. Use hand creams or moisturizers as needed. Healthy skin helps to keep staph/MRSA on the surface of your skin instead of underneath your skin, which can help prevent an infection.
- See your healthcare provider, if you have an infection that does not improve.

### ***If someone has staph or MRSA at school, or childcare center, what should be done?***

In most cases persons who have staph or MRSA skin infections do **NOT** need be excluded from school, childcare or work provided that their wounds can be properly covered and they are receiving appropriate medical treatment. Closing of schools, childcare centers and businesses because a person has been diagnosed with staph or MRSA is generally **NOT** necessary. Almost all transmission of the bacteria occurs person to person, through direct skin to skin contact or through contact with personal items. Sanitizing surfaces that come into direct contact with a person’s skin is a good general practice, not only for preventing staph or MRSA, but for other germs as well.

### ***Is MRSA a reportable disease?***

Single cases of MRSA are not reportable to the local health department. If a cluster of cases occurs (3 or more cases among non-household contacts) then your local health department should be informed.

### ***Where can I go for additional information on MRSA?***

For additional information on MRSA, please visit our website at [www.milwaukee.gov/mrsa](http://www.milwaukee.gov/mrsa) or contact the City of Milwaukee Health Department’s informational hotline at 286-3616.