

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) for Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM)

What is MRSA?

MRSA is a kind of bacteria that is resistant to some antibiotics. To understand MRSA, it is helpful to learn about *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria, often called “staph,” because MRSA is a kind of staph.

Staph are bacteria commonly carried on the skin or in the nose of healthy people. Approximately 25-30% of the population carries staph on their bodies, on their skin or in their nose, at any one time. Of this 25-30%, approximately 5-10% carry MRSA.

How are staph spread?

Staph are spread by direct skin-to-skin contact, such as shaking hands, playing contact sports, sexual contact, or other direct contact with the skin of another person. Staph are also spread by contact with items that have been touched by people with staph, like towels shared after bathing and drying off, or shared athletic equipment in the gym or on the field.

Staph infections start when staph get into a cut, scrape or other break in the skin. People who have skin infections—painful, swollen pimples, boils, and rashes, for example—should be very careful to avoid spreading their infection to others.

Do staph always make people sick?

No. Many people carry staph in their nose or on their skin for a period of time and do not know they are carrying them. They do not have skin infections. They do not have any other signs or symptoms of illness. This is called “colonization.” People who are colonized with staph can spread staph to others even if they do not have signs of illness. To cause true infection, MRSA and other staph need to get into the skin, through a scrape, scratch or wound.

What are the symptoms of an infection caused by staph?

Pimples, rashes, pus-filled boils, especially when warm, painful, red or swollen, can mean that you have a staph or MRSA skin infection. Most of these infections are minor and get better on their own, with warm soaks or by draining. People with MRSA and other staph skin infections – especially boils or wounds that are swollen and leak pus – can most easily spread staph to others.

Occasionally, staph can also cause more serious problems such as surgical wound infections, bloodstream infections and pneumonia. The symptoms could include high fever, swelling, heat and pain around a wound, headache and fatigue. See your doctor if you think you have an infection; he or she will decide what treatment is necessary, if any.

Is MRSA different from other staph?

Yes. MRSA is different from other staph because it cannot be treated with some antibiotics. However, there are antibiotics that still work. When antibiotics are needed to treat a MRSA infection, the right antibiotic must be used. If the right antibiotic is not used, the treatment may not work.

Is MRSA a problem for men who have sex with other men (MSM)?

Outbreaks of MRSA skin infections have been described in MSM. Some studies have also shown an association between the spread of MRSA among MSM and high-risk drug use, participation in group sex parties, use of internet for sexual contacts, skin-abrading sex, and history of sexually-transmitted infections.

In general, MRSA is becoming increasingly widespread throughout the general population, including among men who have sex with other men. Like anyone else, MSM may carry MRSA on their skin or in their nose and may not have an infection. Anyone with skin-to-skin contact with someone who is carrying MRSA may become colonized and may get an infection if they get the bacteria into an open wound. Skin and soft tissue infections, if they occur, can usually be managed by a healthcare provider.

What should I do if I think I have a staph skin infection?

Keep the area clean and dry. See your doctor, especially if the infection is large, painful, warm to the touch, or does not heal by itself. Be sure to tell your doctor: if you are a man who has sex with other men; if you have been in contact with someone with MRSA or another skin infection; if you have had MRSA infections in the past; or if you have any other risk factors which may increase the likelihood of a MRSA infection.

How will my doctor know if I have a MRSA infection?

The only way to tell the difference between MRSA and other staph infections is with lab tests. Lab tests will also help your doctor decide which antibiotic should be used for treatment, if antibiotic treatment is necessary.

Your doctor will usually take a sample on a swab (like a Q-tip) from the infected area. The sample will be sent to a laboratory to see if the infection is caused by staph. Blood and other body fluids can also be tested for staph.

How are MRSA infections treated?

Most MRSA skin infections are treated by good wound and skin care: keeping the area clean and dry, washing your hands after caring for the area, carefully disposing of any bandages, and allowing your body to heal.

Sometimes treatment requires the use of antibiotics. If antibiotics are prescribed, it is important to use the medication as directed, unless your doctor tells you to stop. If the infection has not improved within a few days after seeing your doctor, contact your doctor again.

How can I prevent a staph infection?

- Regular handwashing is the best way to prevent getting and spreading staph, including MRSA. Keep your hands clean by washing them frequently with soap and warm water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, especially after direct contact with another person's skin.
- Shower thoroughly after having sex.
- 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 and razors. 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. Healthy skin helps to keep the staph on the surface of your skin from causing an infection underneath your skin.
- Contact your doctor if you have a skin infection that does not improve.

For more information about MRSA, visit the MDPH website at www.mass.gov/dph