

Information for patients who test positive for Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA)

Background

The State of California requires some patients to be tested for the presence of MRSA. Your test results are “positive” for MRSA, which means you may be infected. This tip sheet provides information about what your test results mean. It also offers information on how to prevent further infection.

What is Staphylococcus?

Staphylococcus aureus, also called “staph” (pronounced staff) is a bacteria commonly found on the skin, inside the nose, or in the armpit, groin, or genital area. Sometimes called S.aureus, staph can occur in two ways:

- Colonization: About 25 to 30 percent of people are colonized with S. aureus. In most cases the bacteria does not cause illness, but it is present on the skin. This is called colonization.
- Infection: Sometimes S. aureus can cause infections such as pimples or boils. In rare cases, the bacteria causes serious infections such as pneumonia, surgical wound infections, or blood stream infections.

What is MRSA?

Some strains of S. aureus have become resistant to antibiotics such as methicillin, oxacillin, and others. This means that normal kinds of treatment will not work. MRSA is one of those drug resistant strains of the bacteria. If a person becomes infected with MRSA, different antibiotics will be used to treat the infection.

What do MRSA skin infections look like?

MRSA skin infections generally begin with a minor injury that allows the bacteria to enter the skin. These infections can happen to otherwise healthy people. The symptoms of MRSA infection can include:

- Redness, warmth, swelling, and/or tenderness of the skin
- Boils or blisters (may look like spider bites)
- Skin sores that don’t heal or that keep coming back

How is MRSA spread?

MRSA can be spread by close contact with an infected person. The bacteria can rub off the skin of an infected person and onto the skin of another person when they have prolonged skin-to-skin contact. The bacteria are present in wound drainage and pus. Since patients in the hospital may be more likely to become colonized or infected with MRSA, hospital staff often take extra steps to prevent the spread of MRSA. These protective measures may include:

- Placing you in a private room
- Health care personnel wearing gowns and gloves when they are in your room

When I go home will I still have MRSA?

Even when antibiotic medicines succeed in treating MRSA infection, people generally remain colonized with MRSA. If this is the case for you, there is a chance that you might spread the bacteria to others such as family or coworkers without knowing it. But there are steps you can take to prevent this.

How can I prevent a MRSA infection?

- Washing your hands is the best defense against the spread of MRSA. Soap and warm water, or alcohol-based hand gel (available in most pharmacies) are a good way to keep your hands clean. Special antibacterial soaps are not required.
- Wash clothes, towels, and linens, in hot water if possible, and add bleach if it's safe to do so with the items. It is not necessary to boil clothes. Use a hot dryer, if possible.
- Don't share personal items such as towels, sheets, razors, clothing, and athletic equipment.
- Keep wounds covered with clean, dry bandages.
- Keep shared areas clean by wiping down surfaces (such as countertops, doorknobs, and light switches) with a disinfectant.

If I have MRSA, what steps can I take to prevent others from getting infected?

If you have a skin infection, keep it clean and covered until it is healed. Sit out athletic games or practice until it is healed. Use disposable gloves when handling dressings contaminated with material from the infected area, throw the used gloves away, and wash your hands afterward.

- Keep drainage from the infected area away from others. However, you don't have to be isolated from other people in general.
- Use antibiotics only as directed by your doctor. Make sure you take all of the antibiotics prescribed even if you are feeling better. This will make sure the infection is fully treated. Don't take anyone else's antibiotics or leftover antibiotics from another infection.
- Further testing is not generally needed, except as recommended by your doctor for follow-up of an infection. If you are colonized, you don't need to be retested.

- Regularly clean your bathroom and personal items. Wash linens and clothes that are soiled with hot water and soap when possible. DO NOT SHARE towels, soap, or personal care items.

What should I do if I think I have MRSA infection?

- Talk with your doctor or other health care professional. He or she can answer your questions and provide more information.
- If any infection is not getting better with treatment, let your doctor or other health care professional know right away.

For further information:

Visit our Web site at kp.org/health. Here you'll find the Health Encyclopedia, which offers more in-depth information on this and many other topics.

Or connect to these sites:

- [Mayo Clinic](#)
- [Center for Disease Control](#)
- [Washington State Department of Health](#)