

Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA)
Has been in the News recently



Overview
From Healthwise

What is methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA)?

Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) are a type of staphylococcus or "staph" bacteria that are resistant to many [antibiotics](#). Staph bacteria, like other kinds of bacteria, normally live on your skin and in your nose, usually without causing problems. MRSA is different from other types of staph because it cannot be treated with certain antibiotics such as methicillin.

Staph bacteria only become a problem when they cause infection. For some people, especially those who are weak or ill, these infections can become serious.

What causes an infection?

MRSA, like all staph bacteria, can be spread from one person to another through casual contact or through contaminated objects. It is commonly spread from the hands of someone who has MRSA. This could be anyone in a healthcare setting or in the community. MRSA is usually not spread through the air like the common cold or flu virus, unless a person has MRSA [pneumonia](#) and is coughing.

MRSA that is acquired in a hospital or healthcare setting is called hospital-based methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (HA-MRSA). In most cases, a person who is already sick or who has a weakened [immune system](#) becomes infected with HA-MRSA. These infections can occur in wounds or skin, burns, and IV or other sites where tubes enter the body, as well as in the eyes, bones, heart, or blood.

What are the symptoms of MRSA?

Symptoms of a MRSA infection depend on where the infection is. Community-based MRSA commonly causes skin infections, such as [boils](#), [abscesses](#), or [cellulitis](#). Often, people think they have been bitten by a spider or insect. Because MRSA infections can become serious in a short amount of time, it is important to see your doctor right away if you notice a boil or other skin problem.

How is an infection diagnosed?

If your doctor thinks that you are infected with MRSA, he or she will send a sample of your infected wound, blood, or urine to a lab. The lab will grow the bacteria and then test to see which kinds of antibiotics kill the bacteria. This test may take several days.

How is an infection treated?

Depending on how serious your infection is, the doctor may drain your wound, prescribe antibiotic medicine, give you an IV (**intravenous**) antibiotic, or hospitalize you. You might also be given an ointment to put on your skin or inside your nose and be asked to wash your skin daily with an antibiotic soap called chlorhexidine (Hibiclens) to reduce MRSA bacteria on your skin.

Most cases of community-based methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (CA-MRSA) begin as mild skin infections such as pimples or boils. Your doctor may be able to treat these infections without antibiotics by using a minor surgical procedure that opens and drains the sores.

If your doctor prescribes antibiotic medicine, be sure to take all the medicine even if you begin to feel better right away. If you do not take all the medicine, you may not kill all the bacteria. No matter what your treatment, it is important to call your doctor if your infection does not get better as expected.

How can I prevent getting or spreading MRSA?

As more antibiotic-resistant bacteria develop, hospitals are taking extra care to practice "infection control," which includes frequent hand-washing and isolation of patients who are infected with MRSA.

You can also take steps to protect yourself from MRSA.

- Practice good hygiene.
 - Keep your hands clean by washing them frequently and thoroughly with soap and warm water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Hand-washing is the best way to avoid spreading germs.
 - Keep cuts and scrapes clean and covered with a bandage and avoid contact with other people's wounds or bandages.
 - Do not share personal items such as towels or razors.
- Be smart about using antibiotics. Know that antibiotics **can** help treat bacterial infections but they **cannot** cure viral infections. Always ask your doctor if antibiotics are the best treatment and avoid pressuring your doctor into prescribing antibiotics when they won't help you get better.
- Always take all your antibiotic medicine as prescribed by your doctor. Using only part of the medicine can cause antibiotic-resistant bacteria to develop.
- Do not save any antibiotics and do not use antibiotics that were prescribed for someone else.
- If you are in the hospital, remind doctors and nurses to wash their hand before they touch you.
 - Keep your hands clean.
 - Keep your environment clean by wiping frequently touched surfaces (such as countertops, doorknobs, and light switches) with a disinfectant.