

Making Sense of MRSA

You've probably heard about infection with MRSA (or methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*). These news-making bacteria have become a more common cause of infections over the past few years, especially in kids who've never been in the hospital. It requires different antibiotics to treat it, and doctors may have to use other approaches (like draining pus from skin abscesses caused by the bug) to cure an infection.

MRSA is among emerging types of bacteria that the usual antibiotics just can't tackle anymore. Why? Because certain strains of bacteria, sometimes called "super bugs," have built up a resistance — or immunity — to a lot of the often-used drugs.

For years, the medical community has worried that the rampant overuse and misuse of antibiotics, especially in kids, could give rise to this kind of drug-resistant bacteria — a good reason for doctors and parents to avoid using antibiotics for children's common colds or other virus infections that don't respond to antibiotic treatment anyway.

About Staph

A specific strain of the common bacteria *Staphylococcus aureus*, MRSA causes a type of "staph" infection that's been cropping up among otherwise healthy people as skin infections, such as abscesses. Staph bacteria live on most people's skin or in their noses without causing any problems. But a staph infection can happen when the germ enters the body through broken skin such as a cut, scrape, or rash.

Staph is the usual suspect in many skin infections. Staph infections, including those caused by MRSA, usually begin as red bumps resembling boils or pimples (people sometimes mistake them for spider bites). The bumps often become swollen, painful, and filled with pus.

Most staph skin infections are often minor and can be remedied by regularly washing and bandaging the area and/or using oral antibiotics or antibiotic ointments. Sometimes the abscesses from staph need to be drained by a doctor.

But MRSA can't be treated with antibiotics that are routinely given, such as methicillin, penicillin, and amoxicillin. Doctors now must use other medications to try to treat MRSA. And, if the infection spreads to other parts of the body, MRSA may lead to serious complications like pneumonia and blood and joint infections.

The Real "News"

Although MRSA is making headlines, it's not a new infection — the first case was reported in 1968. The difference is that now, MRSA is affecting more people outside of hospitals. MRSA used to be seen only in those with weakened immune systems — chronically ill people who'd been hospitalized for a long time or had surgery, those receiving long courses of antibiotic therapy, or people living in long-term care facilities like nursing homes or prisons.

But now a growing number of otherwise healthy people who are not considered at risk for MRSA are getting the infection. Called **community-associated MRSA (CA-MRSA)**, this type of staph infection has been found most recently in a few high school and

professional sports teams. The bug can be passed to athletes via gyms and locker rooms and through shared equipment or skin-to-skin contact (e.g., wrestling and football). Kids in child-care settings may also be at risk.

What This Means to You

Staph infections can spread through the air and to other people or other parts of your body via contaminated surfaces (e.g., towels, used bandages) or dirty hands or fingernails.

To help keep this bug at bay in your household:

- Make sure every member of your family washes their hands well and often.
- Use alcohol-based instant hand sanitizers.
- Keep any broken skin clean and covered with a bandage.
- Don't share razors, towels, or other items that come into contact with bare skin.
- Clean shared sports equipment with antiseptic solution before each use or use a barrier (clothing or a towel) between your skin and the equipment.

Call the doctor if:

- your child has an area of skin that's red, painful, swollen, and/or filled with pus
- your child has inflamed skin and is also feverish or feels sick
- skin infections seem to be passing from one family member to another or if two or more family members have skin infections at the same time

Serious cases of MRSA are still relatively rare, but an ounce of prevention can go a long way toward avoiding the infection and keeping your family healthy.

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