QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT
Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA)

MRSA

What is MRSA?

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

What are staph?

Staph are bacteria commonly carried on the skin or in the nose of healthy people. About 25-30% of the U.S. population carry staph on their bodies at any time.

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."

Sometimes, though, staph can cause an infection, especially pimples, boils and other problems with the skin. These infections often contain pus, and may feel itchy and warm. Occasionally, staph cause more serious infections.

How are staph spread?

Staph are spread by direct skin-to-skin contact, such as shaking hands, wrestling, 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.

Is MRSA different from other staph?

Yes. MRSA is different from other staph because it cannot be treated with some antibiotics. 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.

MRSA is just like other staph in almost every other way:

- MRSA can be carried on the skin or in the nose of healthy people, and usually not cause an infection or make them sick.
- It can cause minor skin infections that go away without any special medical treatment.
- It is spread the same way as other staph.
- The symptoms are the same as other staph infections.

MRSA is sometimes said as a single word, "mersa," or by saying all four letters, "M-R-S-A"

Massachusetts
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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.

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, fatigue and others.

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.

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. Lab tests help your doctor decide which antibiotic should be used for treatment, if antibiotic treatment is necessary. 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.
- 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

MRSA

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