

Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA)

An organism requiring contact precautions

This handout describes MRSA and who is at risk for getting it. It also explains how this disease can be spread and offers steps to prevent others from getting it.

Ask your healthcare provider for more information. Also, see “To Learn More,” on the last page of this handout, for online resources about MRSA.

What is MRSA?

Staphylococcus aureus is a type of bacteria found on human skin, in the nose, and in the armpit, groin, and genital areas. It is also called “staph.”

Staph usually does not cause any problems, or it only causes minor infections such as pimples or *boils* (infections of the hair follicles and surrounding skin that cause blister-like swelling). But sometimes staph causes more serious infections such as pneumonia or infections in the blood, a surgical site, or the urinary tract.

Some staph germs resist the usual antibiotics that are given to treat staph infections. These resistant staph germs are called *methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA.

What are the symptoms of MRSA?

Staph infections often begin with an injury that allows the staph germs to enter the skin and develop into an infection. Symptoms may include redness, warmth, swelling, tenderness, boils or blisters, fever, and chills. Staph and MRSA infections are sometimes mistaken for spider bites.

How is MRSA spread?

MRSA is spread by close contact with an infected person during skin-to-skin contact and by sharing objects or touching surfaces the infected person has touched.

Drainage from wounds and pus is also very infectious. Your caregivers should wear gloves and then wash their hands after changing your bandages or touching your infection.



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Objects that might spread MRSA include personal hygiene items (such as towels, soap, razors, wound dressings, bandages, etc.), sheets, clothes, benches in saunas or hot tubs, athletic equipment, bed rails, and bathroom fixtures.

The hands of healthcare workers may also spread MRSA from one patient to another. Tell your healthcare provider if you know that you are infected with MRSA.

Who is at risk for a MRSA infection?

You may be at risk of developing a MRSA infection if you:

- Have recurrent skin diseases or open wounds.
- Have a long-term illness or you are a long-term dialysis patient.
- Have other health conditions that are making you ill.
- Use medicines or street drugs that you inject with needles.
- Have taken antibiotics recently.
- Have been a patient in a hospital or other healthcare facility, such as a nursing home, in the past year.
- Have contact with people who have MRSA or live in a crowded setting.



To diagnose MRSA, a tissue sample from the infected area is tested in the laboratory.

How is MRSA diagnosed?

A culture (tissue sample) from the infected or colonized area is tested for MRSA in the laboratory. Test results determine which antibiotics can treat the infection.

Please note that we are required to test all patients in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for MRSA. We will take cultures from these patients' nostrils when they are admitted and during their stay in the ICU.

What does it mean to be in *contact precautions*?

At UWMC, we place a “contact precautions” sign near the doorway of your room. This alerts healthcare workers and your visitors to follow the extra precautions listed on the sign when caring for you or visiting you.

Hand washing for 15 seconds, using alcohol hand gels, and environmental cleanliness are emphasized. These precautions protect others from getting MRSA.

Here is how being in contact precautions will affect:

Your Care Providers

- Healthcare workers and caregivers will wear gowns and gloves when providing your care.

You, the Patient

- You will be asked to stay in your room unless you need to go to other areas in the hospital for treatment. If you leave your room, you will be asked to wash your hands and to wear a gown, gloves, and a mask (for respiratory MRSA).
- You may **not** use the nutrition rooms while contact precautions are in place. When you want a snack or ice water, ask a member of your healthcare team to bring it to you.

Your Visitors

- Your visitors should clean their hands before they enter your room and when they leave.
- Your healthcare provider may recommend that your visitors wear a gown and gloves when they visit you.

While others are not likely to get a MRSA infection from you, following these guidelines will help keep them as safe as possible.

When can the contact precautions be stopped?

MRSA contact precautions for most patients can be stopped when:

- You have not taken antibiotics to treat MRSA for at least 72 hours,
AND
- One culture from your nostrils and another culture from your throat show that MRSA is not present,
AND
- One of these is true:
 - MRSA is suspected, but one culture from another area (such as an infected wound) shows that MRSA is not present,
OR
 - You have confirmed MRSA, but one culture from each area that did show MRSA no longer shows MRSA.

If you are a patient on a cancer unit, your guidelines for stopping MRSA contact precautions may be different.

If I have MRSA, how can I protect myself and others when I go home?

You must be careful when you go home to keep from spreading MRSA to others. Follow these instructions, and any others your healthcare provider may add:

- Take your antibiotics as instructed. Do not stop taking them and do not take only some of them.
- Make sure you know how to take care of your incision and any *intravascular devices* (such as a catheter or dialysis port) you may have.
- Clean your hands with soap and water or alcohol hand gel often. Always clean your hands before eating and after using the bathroom, changing your wound dressing, and handling any catheters or ports you may have.
- Keep your wounds and bandages clean. Change the bandage as instructed, or whenever it becomes soiled or wet.
- Do not let others use your personal items, such as your towel and razor.
- Clean bathrooms, kitchens, and other areas often with household detergents or disinfectants. Use a solution of 1 tablespoon household bleach mixed in 1 quart of water. This must be made fresh each day. Or, use a product that contains *phenol*, such as Lysol or Pine-Sol.
- Wash your soiled sheets and towels and clothes with hot water and laundry detergent. Dry your clothes in a hot dryer to kill bacteria.
- Wash your dishes and utensils with soap and hot water or in the dishwasher.
- Avoid contact sports or other skin-to-skin contact until your infection is healed.
- Tell all your healthcare providers that you have MRSA. This includes home health aides, physical and occupational therapists, and staff in your provider's office.

To Learn More

To learn more about MRSA, visit these websites:

- **Public Health – Seattle & King County:**
www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/communicable/diseases/mrsa.aspx
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):**
www.cdc.gov/mrsa
- **Washington State Department of Health:**
www.tpchd.org/files/library/2357adf2a147d1aa.pdf

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Epidemiology and Infection Control: 206.598.6122