

Information for patients

MRSA



Infection Control

MRSA - Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus Background

MRSA stands for Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus and is also sometimes referred to as a superbug. Staphylococcus aureus (SA) is a type of bacteria that is commonly found on our bodies. About 1 in 3 of us carries it on the surface of our skin or in our nose without it causing any harm - this is known as being colonised by the bacteria or being a carrier.

However, if SA bacteria get into the body following injury or surgery they can cause infections. SA can cause boils, abscesses and it can infect wounds - both accidental wounds such as grazes and deliberate wounds such as those made when inserting an intravenous drip or during surgery. It may also spread further into the body and cause serious infections such as bacteraemia (blood poisoning).

MRSA can cause the same infections as other types of SA bacteria, however, MRSA infections can be more difficult to treat because they are resistant to many of the antibiotics used for other SA. MRSA infections can still be treated but they may require different types of antibiotics to the ones that are commonly used.

How does MRSA spread?

MRSA bacteria are usually spread through person-to-person contact with someone who has an MRSA infection, or who is a carrier of the bacteria. If a person gets MRSA on their hands they can pass it to people and objects that they touch, who can then in turn pass it on to others. Some people carry MRSA for a few hours while others can carry it for several months or even years.

Who is at risk of getting MRSA infections?

MRSA will not normally cause an infection in a healthy person. Although it is possible for those outside hospital to become infected, MRSA infections are most common in people who are already in hospital or other care facilities.

The people most at risk include those who:

- have a catheter (a plastic tube inserted into the body to drain fluid) or an intravenous infusion,
- have a wound or a leg ulcer,
- have a burn or cut on their skin,
- have skin conditions such as psoriasis,
- have recently had surgery,
- have taken particular antibiotics

How can you tell if someone has MRSA?

Most carriers of MRSA do not develop an infection and so do not have any symptoms and do not become ill. The only way of telling if someone has MRSA is to do special laboratory tests. All patients admitted to Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt (RJAH) have swabs taken from their nose and any wounds. These swabs are sent to the laboratory to test for MRSA.

What treatments are there?

Treatment of MRSA depends on whether you are infected with the bacteria or a carrier. If you are a carrier of MRSA you do not need any treatment for illness, but as you can infect yourself or others it is important to try to remove the bacteria. A special antibiotic cream will be applied to the inside of your nose or your skin to remove the bacteria. You can do this yourself after instruction by a nurse, pharmacist or doctor. In some cases, antibiotic tablets may also be given. If you have a MRSA infection you will be given antibiotics that the bacteria have not yet become resistant to. Initially these are often given through injection or intravenously. The length of treatment will vary from person to person.

How serious is it if I get MRSA?

Most MRSA infections can be easily treated, however some more serious MRSA infections, e.g. MRSA in the bloodstream, can be fatal. Although we know this sounds worrying, it is important for you to understand that most of those who die with an MRSA infection are already seriously ill with another medical condition.

Will I still be admitted to hospital if I'm found to have MRSA?

RJAH has very low rates of MRSA infection. This is because we screen patients by taking swabs and, if MRSA is found we treat patients before they come into hospital. In certain circumstances, if you are a carrier of MRSA you may still be admitted, but doctors may give you treatment to reduce or remove the MRSA bacteria. If you are in hospital and you have an MRSA infection, you may be moved to an isolation room or to a cohort bay (room with others who have the bacteria), to stop MRSA spreading.

Can MRSA harm family and friends?

MRSA does not normally cause harm to healthy people (it can't harm pregnant women, children or babies, providing they are fit and healthy), so if you have an MRSA infection you will still be able to have visitors as normal. However, it is essential that all visitors wash their hands thoroughly before and after visiting every patient. Fast-acting, special alcohol rubs or gels are available at RJAH with dispensers usually located near patients' beds and in other clinical areas. MRSA can affect people who have long-term health problems or fall into one of the At-Risk categories outlined earlier, so ask the staff for advice before visiting.

What do hospital staff do to reduce the risk of spreading MRSA?

Hospital staff who come into contact with patients maintain very high standards of hygiene and take extra care when treating patients with MRSA. Before and after caring for any patient, hospital staff will have thoroughly washed and dried their hands. Many hospitals now use fast-acting, special antiseptic solutions, like alcohol rubs or gels - you will find dispensers, placed near patients' beds and at the entrance to clinical areas, for use by staff, patients and visitors.

Staff wear disposable gloves when they have physical contact with open wounds, for example when changing dressings, handling needles or inserting an intravenous infusion.

What can you do to reduce the risk of spreading MRSA?

If you are prescribed antibiotics you should always make sure that you complete the full course. MRSA is usually passed on by human contact, often from the skin of the hands. You should always wash your hands thoroughly before and after visiting someone in hospital and also feel free to use the antiseptic gel. Please do not sit on the patient's bed. If you are concerned about hygiene, don't be afraid to ask the doctor or nurse treating you, or your visitors, if they have washed their hands.

If you are in hospital, you can reduce your risk of infection by taking sensible precautions:

- Keep your hands and body clean. Take soap, a flannel and moist hand-wipes with you, as well as your own razor.
- Always wash your hands after using the toilet or commode.
- Always wash your hands or clean them with a hand-wipe immediately before and after eating a meal.
- Make sure your bed area is regularly cleaned and report any unclean toilet or bathroom facilities to staff.

What happens after I go home?

You will be sent home when the medical staff looking after you are happy with your condition and think that it is safe for you to leave. If you require further treatment the medical staff will inform your GP/ other doctor or nursing staff. Having MRSA should not affect your normal daily activities or social contacts. If you have an open wound this should be covered when there are other people around or whilst outside your home. It is important that you wash your hands carefully before and after touching your wound.

Occasionally MRSA can return after treatment has been stopped. If you come into hospital again you may be asked to occupy a single room while tests are carried out to see if the MRSA has come back.

For further information please contact the Infection Control Nurse on **01691 404587** bleep **102**.

Further Information

The Department of Health has published 'A simple guide to MRSA' available at: www.dh.gov.uk

The Health Protection Agency provides information about many different infections that can occur in the UK. 'MRSA – information for patients in hospital' is available at:

www.hpa.org.uk/publications/2006/mrsa_leaflet.pdf

NHS Direct is a nurse-led service for patients with questions about diagnosis and treatment of common conditions.

Tel: **0845 4647** www.nhsdirect.uk

Patient UK provides leaflets on health and disease translated into a selection of other languages as well as links to national support/self-help groups and a directory of UK health websites.

www.patient.co.uk

If you require a special edition of this leaflet

This leaflet is available in large print. Arrangements can also be made on request for it to be explained in your preferred language. Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) email: rjah.pals.office@nhs.net

Feedback

Tell us what you think of our patient information leaflet. Please send your comments to the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) email: rjah.pals.office@nhs.net

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