West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources
Information for the Public -
Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA)

What is Staphylococcus aureus?

Staphylococcus aureus, or "staph" is a bacteria that lives on the skin or in the nose of healthy people. Occasionally, staph can cause infections of the skin, bloodstream, lungs, bones, joints, heart, or almost any part of the body.

What is methicillin resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA)?

MRSA is a type of staph that has become resistant to the antibiotics that are commonly used to treat staph. This means that an infection with MRSA is more difficult to treat.

Where are staph and MRSA found?

Staph and MRSA may be found on the skin or in the nose. About 30 to 50% of people may carry the staph bacteria on their skin without getting ill.

What is the difference between colonization and infection?

Colonization means that bacteria is carried on the skin, but is not causing disease. Infection means that bacteria has invaded the body and is causing illness.

Who is most at risk for staph infections?

While anyone can get an infection with staph, certain persons are more at risk. These people include diabetics, people on dialysis, persons who use injection drugs, people who have recently had surgery, and persons with chronic diseases such as cancer. Staph infections are also more common in persons who have a tube going into their body (such as a urinary catheter or intravenous (IV) catheter).

MRSA infections are more likely in persons who have recently received antibiotics or recently been in a hospital or nursing home. In the last few years, MRSA infections have also been identified in persons outside of hospitals. Cases of MRSA disease in the community are associated with recent antibiotic use, sharing contaminated items, active skin disease, and living in crowded settings. Community associated MRSA infections are usually skin infections; however, severe illness can also occur.

How common are staph and MRSA?

Staph colonization is very common. Staph infection is much more unusual, and serious staph infections are even more rare.

MRSA infections used to occur just in hospitals and healthcare facilities. Over time, these infections are being identified in the community.

Are staph and MRSA infections treatable?

Yes, staph infections are treatable. Skin infections can usually be treated with oral antibiotics. MRSA infections are usually treatable, but they may be more difficult to treat. The doctor will have to get a laboratory test to tell the difference between MRSA and staph.

How are staph and MRSA spread?

Staph and MRSA can spread among people by close physical contact. Spread may also occur by touching objects, such as towels, sheets, clothes, work-out areas and sports' equipment contaminated by the skin of a person with MRSA or staph.

How can I prevent staph or MRSA infections?

Keep your hands clean by washing thoroughly with soap and water. Alcohol-based hand cleansers also help. Keep cuts and wounds clean and covered with a dressing until healed. Avoid contact with other peoples' wounds. Avoid sharing personal items.

MRSA infections can be prevented by avoiding unnecessary use of antibiotics. Only take antibiotics if you really need them. When a doctor prescribes antibiotics, take them as directed.

Adapted from CDC Information