

Frequently Asked Questions about Methicillin-Resistant Staph Aureus (MRSA)

Background

Recent reports about the presence of a staph infection called Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) in Virginia has caught our community's attention. The purpose of this Frequently Asked Questions webpage is to help you learn more about MRSA, the steps you can take to stay healthy and the role of our schools.

What is Staphylococcus aureus or Staph?

Staph is a type of bacteria. It may cause skin infections that look like pimples or boils. Skin infections caused by staph may be red, swollen, and painful or have pus or other drainage.

What is Methicillin-Resistant Staph Aureus (MRSA)?

MRSA is a type of staph that is resistant to certain antibiotics, making it harder to treat. About 25 to 30 percent of healthy people may carry staph aureus and only 1 percent may carry MRSA. Healthy people often carry staph bacteria on the skin or in the nose, and most of the time these bacteria do not cause a problem.

Like other types of staph, MRSA may cause skin infections that look like pimples or boils which often are red, swollen, and painful or have pus or other drainage. The infections most often occur where there are cuts or abrasions in the skin, and in areas of the body covered by hair. The most effective way to prevent staph infection is to practice proper hygiene and wound care.

What is the difference between HAMRSA and CAMRSA?

HAMRSA refers to health-care associated MRSA. This term is used to describe MRSA causing illness in people inside hospitals and healthcare facilities. CAMRSA refers to community-associated MRSA. This term is used to describe people who have not had a medical procedure or been hospitalized within the past year who acquired MRSA in the community.

How do you get a staph infection?

MRSA skin infections can happen anywhere in any setting. It is most commonly transmitted by:

- Direct skin-to-skin contact
- Contact with surfaces that have come into contact with someone else's infection or shared items (towels, used bandages)

Factors that may make it easier for transmission are crowding, frequent skin-to-skin contact, cuts or abrasions, contaminated items or surfaces, and lack of cleanliness. MRSA is commonly found in hospitals, military barracks, correctional facilities, schools and dorms.

How is MRSA treated?

It is important for healthcare providers to diagnose MRSA early. If you have a wound that hasn't healed properly or has unusual amounts of drainage or pus, you need to seek medical attention. MRSA can only be diagnosed through a laboratory test. Treatment will depend on the site and severity of the infection. Not all MRSA infections require antibiotics. Almost all MRSA skin infections can be effectively treated by drainage of pus with or without antibiotics. More serious infections, such as pneumonia, bloodstream infections or bone infections are very rare in healthy people who get MRSA skin infections. The most effective way to prevent MRSA infection is to practice proper hygiene and wound care.

How can I protect myself from MRSA?

There are several steps you can take:

- Practice good hygiene. Keep hands clean by properly washing with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Shower immediately after exercise
- Cover cuts or abrasions with clean, dry bandages until healed
- Avoid sharing personal items that come into contact with your bare skin such as towels, razors, etc.
- Use a barrier like clothing or a towel between your skin and shared equipment such as weight training benches
- Maintain a clean environment by establishing cleaning procedures for frequently touched surfaces and surfaces that come into direct contact with people's skin.

If I have a MRSA skin infection, how do I prevent spreading it to others?

Be sure to:

- Cover your wound until it is healed. Follow your healthcare provider's instructions on proper care of the wound.
- Clean your hands frequently and be sure those in close contact to you such as your family, do the same.
- Don't share personal items such as towels, razors, clothing, uniforms or athletic equipment.
- Wash sheets, towels and clothes that become soiled with water and laundry detergent and use a dryer to dry clothes completely.

What are schools in Albemarle County doing to protect students and employees from MRSA infection?

Our School Division is taking steps to reduce the spread of germs and infection:

- We are increasing employee and parent awareness by providing information about MSRA and prevention.
- We have increased and enhanced custodial cleaning efforts in schools. Our standard procedure is to disinfect restrooms, health clinics and locker rooms in schools daily. Custodians also will now disinfect daily doorknobs and handles, sinks and counters in classrooms.
- We have shared information about prevention and control of MSRA for athletic teams with our athletic directors and coaches.
- We have asked school Principals to remind students about the importance of hand washing and to review proper hand washing with our students.

Should a school be closed because of an MRSA infection?

In most cases, it is not necessary to close a school because of an MRSA infection in a student. The decision to close a school for any communicable disease should be made by school officials in consultation with local or state public health officials.

Should the school be closed for deep cleaning or disinfection when an MRSA infection is reported?

In general, it's not necessary to close a school to disinfect it when an MRSA infection is reported. Covering wounds greatly reduces the risk of surfaces becoming contaminated with MRSA. When MRSA infections occur, cleaning and disinfection should be performed on surfaces that are likely to come into contact with uncovered or poorly covered infections. The School Division uses Virex 256, a cleaner registered with the Environmental Protection Agency, as a disinfectant effective at removing MRSA from the environment. Whenever there is any cluster of illnesses or viruses, such as pertussis, reported in a school the health department is notified and extra precautions and disinfection are done in a school based on guidance from the local health department. This would also apply to MRSA or staph infections.

Should the entire school community be notified of every MRSA infection?

It is important to remember that staph and MRSA have been and remain a common cause of infection. Usually it would not be necessary to inform the entire school community about a single MRSA infection.

If a cluster of MRSA infections were identified in a particular classroom or school, the local health department would be consulted and notifications may be done.

The identity of a student or employee who has a communicable disease will be kept confidential and revealed only in accordance with state law. This

requirement is reflected in School Board Policy JHCC on Communicable Diseases.

On October 24, 2007, Virginia Governor Timothy Kaine approved an emergency regulation by the State Health Commissioner that requires laboratories to report MRSA infections to the Virginia Department of Health. The goal of the regulation is to assist public health authorities in the effort to compile data on the prevalence of MRSA for surveillance and investigation. The new regulation does not require schools to report individual cases to the local health department.

Should the school be notified if my child has an MRSA infection?

Currently, the School Division or health department does not require parents to report to the school a child with an MRSA infection. If a parent chooses to do so, the school will follow state law to protect the child's identity and respect confidentiality requirements.

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Should students with MRSA skin infections be excluded from attending school?

Unless directed by a physician, students with MRSA infections usually are not excluded from attending school. Exclusion from school would be reserved for those with wound drainage that can't be covered and contained with a clean, dry bandage, and those who can't maintain good personal hygiene. However, those with active infections should be excluded from activities where skin-to-skin contact is likely to occur, like sports, until their infections are healed.

School Division Policy JHCC on communicable diseases does allow the Superintendent of Schools to exclude a student with a communicable disease from school attendance or an employee from work after consultation with the local health department, the person's physician, and other appropriate medical authorities. The decision must be compliant with applicable law and reflect current medical knowledge and research.

Again, the most effective way to prevent contracting or spreading MRSA and other staph infections is to practice proper hygiene and wound care.

Is it better to use soap and water or waterless hand rubs?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend hand washing with soap and water as a sensible strategy for hand hygiene in non-healthcare settings. When soap and water is not available, waterless hand rubs are a good alternative. When a person's hands are visibly soiled, they should wash with soap and water. The use of gloves doesn't eliminate the need for hand washing. Hands should be washed after removing gloves.

Information adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Q&A About MRSA in Schools, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, and from Albemarle County Public Schools Office of Support Services (434) 296-5877.