

What is MRSA?

Staphylococcus aureus is a common bacterium (germ), which up to 30 per cent of the population carry on parts of their skin or in the nose without any problems or infections developing.

Some strains of Staphylococcus aureus are resistant to some antibiotics, including methicillin, and these strains are referred to as Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA). Both MRSA and Staphylococcus aureus can be carried by patients both in their nose and on their skin.

MRSA can live harmlessly on the skin and in some chronic wounds such as leg ulcers but can cause problems if it does get into a skin break such as a surgical wound or parts of the body that are normally sterile, such as the bladder.

MRSA tends to be a problem in hospitals as people who are already unwell are more vulnerable to infection. It can also be easily spread from person to person.

What causes MRSA?

Like many bacteria, MRSA usually only becomes a problem if your immune system (which normally fights infection) is compromised due to illness, certain medications, surgery or injury. It can cause more serious infections if it enters the body through wounds or tubes after surgery or serious illness.

But it is worth remembering that:

MRSA only affects a minority of people and not all people with MRSA will develop an infection

The majority of patients that have MRSA are either colonised (presence of the MRSA on the skin and causing no harm) or have superficial infections that don't require specific treatment

MRSA can be acquired in the community as well

Importantly, MRSA does not pose a risk to healthy people (those without wounds or chronic illness).

Can MRSA be treated?

Yes, MRSA can usually be treated. There are antibiotics other than the group that methicillin belongs to, which can be given if a person is unwell with an MRSA infection. Other medications, such as antiseptic wash and nasal ointments can also be used to remove MRSA from the nose and skin when it is considered to be harmful to a patient for example, before surgery.

How can we prevent the spread of MRSA?

The easiest way to stop the spread of MRSA and other organisms in hospitals is by everyone practising good hand hygiene. Organisms such as MRSA can be spread very easily from person to person by direct contact, such as hands. However, MRSA can also be removed very easily with good hand washing using soap and water or, alternatively, by the use of alcohol gel on visibly clean hands.

Because MRSA can be passed on by human contact we need the help of patients and visitors as well as our staff to help combat it.

If you are a visitor, please wash your hands before and after visiting your friend or relative. You can use traditional soap and water or the alcohol hand gels provided. These are alcohol based and kill germs very effectively. Again, please use the chairs provided rather than sit on your relative or friend's bed. You should also report any unclean areas within the hospital wards to a member of staff so we can take action.

Whether you are a patient or a visitor please don't be afraid to ask the doctor or nurse if they have washed their hands before they treat you or your relative or friend.

If you need any more information, or want to learn about MRSA, you may find these following internet sites useful:

Health Protection Agency - www.hpa.org.uk for advice and information on MRSA

Department of Health - www.dh.gov.uk for information on the Government policy.