



Frequently Asked Questions about Meticillin Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and Healthcare Workers

What is *Staphylococcus aureus*?

Staphylococcus aureus is a bacterium that normally lives harmlessly on human skin and is found in the nose or on the skin in up to a third of healthy people. It does not usually cause a problem unless it gets into a skin break where it can cause a variety of infections, ranging from localized skin lesions such as boils or wound infections to serious invasive disease. It is normally killed by antibiotics.

What is MRSA?

Meticillin Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) is a strain of *S.aureus* that has developed resistance to many antibiotics commonly used to treat staphylococcus infections. As a result it can be difficult to treat.

How does MRSA spread?

MRSA is spread from person to person by direct skin contact or through indirect contact for example, when a person touches an object that has been contaminated with the bacteria. In rare cases, MRSA can spread in the air if a person is very heavily colonised on the skin or in the respiratory tract. In such cases droplets may contaminate the environment.

How do healthcare workers come in contact with MRSA?

Healthcare workers (HCWs) may carry the bacteria naturally or HCWs that care for patients with MRSA may pick it up on their hands or from contaminated surfaces including bed rails, patient care equipment and over-bed tables. The HCW may then become colonised on their hands, in the nose or other body sites and become carriers of the bacteria. It can then be spread by HCW's hands during the course of patient related procedures.

How does MRSA affect healthcare workers?

While it is important to ensure that staff do not become carriers, colonisation with MRSA does not indicate infection and poses no threat to the healthy worker. Staff who are in good health are unlikely to acquire MRSA infections. However staff may develop an infection if they have a graze or wound, accidentally cut themselves or if their immune system is weakened or compromised.

How is the spread of MRSA prevented?

Good personal hygiene and standard infection control practices are the key to the prevention and control of MRSA in healthcare settings.

- The single most effective way of preventing the spread of MRSA is by proper and thorough hand washing. All healthcare facilities should have a written policy in relation to hand hygiene and local guidance for dealing with MRSA which should take account of current national guidelines.
- The number of HCWs who have direct contact with patients colonised or infected with MRSA should be kept to a minimum. Staff with exfoliative skin lesions should be excluded from the care of patients colonised or infected with MRSA.

- Cleanliness standards should be maintained and a system should be in place to ensure surfaces are cleaned and disinfected regularly. Special attention should be paid to surfaces that are frequently touched. Staff carrying out cleaning duties should receive adequate instruction, training and information to perform their duties safely.

When should hand washing be carried out?

Hand washing should be carried out in accordance with the World Health Organisation's 5 moments for hand hygiene:

1. before patient contact;
2. before an aseptic task;
3. after body fluid exposure;
4. after patient contact; and
5. after contact with patient surroundings.

What should I do if I get an MRSA infection at work?

Staff who are infected during the course of their work should report the infection to their line manager or Occupational Health Department. Accurate up to date records on MRSA patients and infected staff should be kept.

What should training on MRSA cover?

Suitable training should be put in place for all staff at risk (including temporary or locum nursing staff), which should include:

- information on MRSA;
- correct hygiene procedures;
- consequences of MRSA carriage;
- infection control (including appropriate use of personal protective equipment); and
- measures to prevent carriage.

As an employee what should I do?

- Adhere to good hand washing procedures.
- Cover cuts or breaks in the skin with impermeable dressings.
- Cover infected or exfoliating wounds or lesions with appropriate dressings.
- Seek advice before caring for MRSA positive patients if you have an exfoliative skin condition.
- Inform your line manager if you feel that your immune system is in any way compromised.

Where can I get further information?

- For national guidelines and information on MRSA and hand hygiene see "A Strategy for the Control of Antimicrobial Resistance in Ireland (SARI), The Control and Prevention of MRSA in Hospitals and in the Community" and "Guidelines for Hand Hygiene in Irish Health Care Settings" at www.hpsc.ie
- See www.who.int for further information on hand hygiene in healthcare.