

What is *Staphylococcus aureus*?

Everybody has a variety of bacteria (germs) on their skin. About half the adult population carry (either on their skin or in their nose or mouth) bacteria called ***Staphylococcus aureus* (often referred to as 'staph' or 'golden staph')**. There are many different strains (types) of *S. aureus* and most of the time it lives and multiplies on the body without causing any problems – this is called colonisation. However, sometimes it can get inside the body through broken skin and cause infection.

What is MRSA?

Some strains of *S. aureus* are difficult to treat as they have become resistant to commonly used antibiotics (this means the antibiotics are no longer effective). When this occurs it is described as **Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA).**

MRSA is a 'notifiable disease' under the WA Health Act, which means when a laboratory identifies MRSA it must be reported to the Department of Health (DoH) who monitor MRSA in Western Australia (WA).

What is CA-MRSA?

Community-associated MRSA (CA-MRSA) are specific strains of MRSA. They mostly cause infections in healthy people, living in the community, who have not been hospitalised or have had medical procedures. In recent years some CA-MRSA strains have been imported into WA by people who have travelled overseas or to the eastern states of Australia.

Why are these CA-MRSA strains of special importance?

CA-MRSA strains are known to spread easily to close contacts of the infected person, especially members of the same household. They can cause infections in otherwise healthy people, and these infections are often recurrent. The DoH provides information and recommendations for people who have acquired CA-MRSA to help prevent serious or recurrent infections and to prevent spread to others.

How is CA-MRSA spread?

Like all strains of MRSA, spread is usually from **person to person by direct contact** with a person who is infected or colonised with CA-MRSA. This can occur when people have any form of close skin to skin contact. It may also spread by having contact with shared items (e.g. sharing towels) or surfaces that are contaminated with CA-MRSA. It is not usually spread through the air.

What are the signs and symptoms of CA-MRSA infection?

All strains of *S.aureus* can infect a range of tissues and body systems including the skin, lungs and bloodstream. Often a CA-MRSA skin infection will have an initial appearance of an insect bite. The symptoms that develop with CA-MRSA infection are general symptoms that are caused by other bacteria. Redness, swelling, pain, heat and the presence of pus are common signs of local skin infection. Some skin infections will develop into more serious infections such as boils or abscesses. In some cases *S.aureus* can enter the blood stream from an existing infection (e.g. wound or abscess). Again, symptoms of bloodstream infection are not specific to CA-MRSA. Typically, clinical signs and symptoms can include high fever, rigors (shakes) and low blood pressure (shock). This can be a life-threatening illness.



How are CA-MRSA infections treated?

Taking a swab of any pus is very important as this directs the doctor to the right antibiotics. Remember that a lot of the 'usual' antibiotics used for treating *S.aureus* infections will not work for CA-MRSA strains. Sometimes it is necessary to lance a boil or abscess and allow the pus to drain. Once treatment is commenced, you should see improvement within 48 hours – if your condition does not get better, or if it worsens you need to seek prompt medical attention.

Can I get rid of this CA-MRSA?

Once the infection is cleared, it is recommended that we try and remove the CA-MRSA from your skin or your nose to prevent infections re-occurring. This treatment is called 'decolonisation.' This involves using a body wash and nasal ointment for 10 days.

Is there a vaccination against CA-MRSA?

There is no vaccination available to prevent you from acquiring any strain of *S.aureus*, including CA-MRSA.

How can I prevent the spread of CA-MRSA?

The pus or fluid from these infections is very infectious and increases the risk of spread if your hands or other surfaces become contaminated with secretions. You should always:

- wash your hands often, or use an alcohol based hand rub, especially after contact with a wound or dressing
- keep skin infections or wounds covered at all times until they are completely healed
- maintain good personal hygiene e.g. regular bathing/showering and change of clothing
- do not share personal items that contact the skin e.g. clothing, towels, toothbrushes, soap bars, razors, brushes, sports equipment
- wash bed linen and towels regularly, preferably using a hot wash and detergent
- Keep your home environment clean with regular cleaning and or vacuuming.

What should I tell my household contacts?

'Household contacts' are those people who live in your house on a regular basis. CA-MRSA can spread easily between household members. However, just because a person lives in the same household does not mean they will acquire MRSA. You should inform your doctor, if there has been recurring skin infections within your household. You should inform your household contacts that you have a CA-MRSA infection and share this information sheet with them.

It is recommended that household contacts discuss this information with their doctor, especially if they have a history of skin infections e.g. boils or abscesses, or if they are at risk of infection due to other medical conditions (e.g. diabetes, cancer). They should seek prompt medical attention if any infections develop.

If any of your household contacts work in a healthcare setting, they need to discuss this with the Infection Control Professional at their work place.

What should I do if I require admission to hospital?

If you have a history of any type of MRSA infection or colonisation, you should let the staff at the hospital know. This will assist them in providing the appropriate care for you and ensure appropriate antibiotics are prescribed if required.

Where can I find more information on CA-MRSA?

More information on CA-MRSA is available from the Department of Health website at:
www.public.health.wa.gov.au/3/332/3/mrsa.pm

