

# MRSA

Information for patients in hospital



This leaflet contains information about MRSA - what it is and how it affects patients in hospital and the people around them

# 1 What is MRSA?

There are lots of micro-organisms (germs) on our skin and in the environment around us. Most of them are harmless, some are beneficial and a very small proportion can cause harm.

*Staphylococcus aureus* is a common germ that is found on the skin and in the nostrils of about a third of healthy people. It can cause infections. MRSA stands for methicillin or meticillin (M) resistant (R) *Staphylococcus* (S) *aureus* (A). MRSA are varieties of *Staphylococcus aureus* that have developed resistance to methicillin (a type of penicillin) and some other antibiotics that are used to treat infections.

MRSA is not new. It was first found in the 1960s following the widespread use of antibiotics including methicillin. MRSA is found in many countries.

Some people carry MRSA on their skin or in their nostrils. They are described as being colonised with MRSA. Some people carry MRSA for a few hours or days, while others carry it for weeks or months. People are unaware that they carry MRSA because it does not harm them and they have no symptoms, unlike people who are infected with MRSA.

MRSA can cause harm when it gets an opportunity to enter the body. It can cause simple local infections such as pimples and boils, or more serious problems such as wound infections, chest infections or blood stream infections.

MRSA and other germs cause problems in hospitals. This is because people who are ill are more vulnerable to infections. Complicated medical treatments including operations, and intravenous lines (drips) provide opportunities for germs to enter the body.

# 2 How do people get MRSA?

MRSA is usually spread by touch. If a person gets MRSA on their hands, they can pass it to people and things that they touch. It may then be picked up and passed on to others.

### **3 How can you tell if someone has MRSA?**

People who carry MRSA do not look or feel different from anyone else and they do not have any symptoms.

Patients who have an infection caused by MRSA may have signs and symptoms of infection. They develop a high temperature, or a fever, or their wound becomes red and sore and discharges pus. Many other germs can cause these signs and symptoms. Laboratory tests are carried out to find out which germs are causing infection.

### **4 What happens when a patient gets MRSA?**

MRSA can spread to other patients. Hospital staff need to take special precautions with patients who have MRSA in order to stop it spreading. Policies for treating patients who carry MRSA or who have an MRSA infection vary according to the local situation and the individual patients affected.

You can ask your infection control team about local policies.

### **5 How is MRSA treated?**

People who get MRSA can be treated.

If a patient carries MRSA, a nurse may take swabs to check which parts of the body have MRSA. Treatment with antiseptic shampoo, powder and cream can help to reduce or remove MRSA from hair, skin and nostrils.

A patient who has an MRSA infection is usually treated with an antibiotic given through an intravenous line (drip).

## Simple hygiene measures reduce the risk of spreading MRSA

- Everyone should clean their hands before and after touching patients
- Hands can be cleaned with soap and water, or an alcohol gel, or hand rubs
- Staff will wear gloves and aprons when they care for a patient who has MRSA
- A patient who has MRSA may be moved to a room on their own or into a separate area for people who have MRSA or other infections

## 6 Can MRSA harm family and friends?

MRSA does not usually harm healthy people, including elderly people, pregnant women, children and babies.

MRSA can affect people who have certain long-term health problems, particularly people who have chronic skin conditions or open wounds. Ask the infection control nurse for advice if someone who has a long-term health problem wants to visit a patient who has MRSA.

Visitors can reduce the possibility of spreading MRSA to other people if they do not sit on the bed and if they clean their hands at the end of the visit.

If a patient who has MRSA wants to visit another patient in the hospital, they should ask the infection control nurse for advice.

## 7 Do patients who get MRSA have to stay longer in hospital?

Patients who carry MRSA do not usually have to stay longer in hospital. The infection control team will decide whether or not they need treatment. This sometimes depends on whether the patient is likely to need further or repeated hospital care.

Patients who have an MRSA infection may have to stay in hospital until they have completed the course of antibiotics and their infection shows signs of clearing up. Alternatively, they may need to continue treatment when they go home.

A patient who is going to a nursing home or residential home can be cared for safely using simple hygiene measures.

## 8 How is MRSA monitored?

Infection control teams monitor MRSA in their own hospitals. NHS hospitals in England send information about MRSA blood stream infections (the most serious MRSA infections) to the Health Protection Agency. The Department of Health publishes figures for individual NHS trusts and the Health Protection Agency publishes national and regional figures. Hospitals can compare their own figures with these national and regional figures to check their progress in reducing MRSA.

## 9 What else does the Health Protection Agency do?

The Health Protection Agency is an independent body that protects the health and well-being of the population.

The Agency plays a critical role in protecting people from infectious diseases and in preventing harm when hazards involving chemicals, poisons or radiation occur.

## Further information about MRSA

- **MRSA**

The Department of Health has published 'A simple guide to MRSA' which is available at [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)

The Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, Georgia, has information about MRSA for patients at [www.cdc.gov/ncidod/hip/ARESIST/mrsafaq.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/hip/ARESIST/mrsafaq.htm)

- **Patient safety**

The National Patient Safety Agency launched its 'cleanyourhands' campaign in July 2003. The campaign aims to minimise the risk to patient safety of low compliance with hand hygiene by NHS staff through a national strategy of improvement. Information is available at [www.npsa.nhs.uk/cleanyourhands](http://www.npsa.nhs.uk/cleanyourhands)

- **Guidance for healthcare workers**

The Royal College of Nursing revised its publication 'Methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA): guidance for nursing staff' in April 2004. It is available at [www.rcn.org.uk/publications/pdf/mrsa.pdf](http://www.rcn.org.uk/publications/pdf/mrsa.pdf)

National guidelines for MRSA were published in 1998.

Revised guidelines for the control of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* infection in hospitals. *Journal of Hospital Infection* 1998; 39: 253-290.

Updated guidelines are being prepared and will be published in the *Journal of Hospital Infection*.

- **MRSA figures for individual acute NHS trusts**

The Department of Health publishes figures for MRSA blood stream infections in individual acute trusts in England at [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)

- **National MRSA figures**

Figures for MRSA and *Staphylococcus aureus* blood stream infections since 1990 are available at [www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics\\_az/staphylo/lab\\_data\\_staphyl.htm](http://www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics_az/staphylo/lab_data_staphyl.htm)

**Health Protection Agency**

Centre for Infections  
61 Colindale Avenue  
London  
NW9 5EQ

Tel 020 8200 4400  
Fax 020 8205 9185  
[www.hpa.org.uk](http://www.hpa.org.uk)

**If you have any further questions,  
please contact**

March 2006  
© Health Protection Agency  
Printed on chlorine free paper