

# MRSA and HIV Infection: How to Protect Yourself

MRSA (MUHR-sah) Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* — is a bacterial “staph” infection that commonly causes skin rashes, boils, or cellulitis. MRSA is resistant to some antibiotics and can be dangerous if it is not properly treated. However, alternative antibiotics and other treatments can usually prevent MRSA from developing into a serious infection.

## There are two types of MRSA:

- Healthcare-acquired MRSA (HA-MRSA) infects people who stay in a hospital or healthcare facility. It is more common in people who are chronically ill or who have weakened immune systems.
- Community-associated MRSA (CA-MRSA) can infect healthy people outside of a healthcare facility. They become infected by having physical contact with someone who has MRSA on his or her skin or by sharing personal items with the person. Athletes, prison inmates, children in daycare facilities, persons who share injection drug equipment, and persons who have sex with multiple partners are especially at risk for infection.
- Bacteria can enter the body of an uninfected person through cuts or scrapes on the skin.

## What does MRSA look like and feel like?

- Usually begins as a pimple or sore on the skin of the legs, arms, face, buttocks, or genitals. You may think you have a spider bite, rather than a skin infection.
- Boils or abscesses: large, red, painful bumps under the skin.
- A cut that is swollen, hot, and filled with pus.
- Blisters filled with fluid, usually on the face.
- A painful patch of red skin that is getting larger (cellulitis).



MRSA abscess

## Can MRSA be medically treated?

Yes. Infections should be treated by a healthcare provider.

Common treatment steps include:

- Treating the skin surface with an antibacterial ointment.
- Making a small incision in the infected area and drain any fluid.
- Performing a culture (test) to determine which antibiotic will work best.
- Prescribing an oral antibiotic, if necessary.

## How do you protect yourself from MRSA?

- Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently with antibacterial soap.
- Don't share personal items, such as towels, clothes, athletic equipment, and bed sheets.
- Use an antibacterial ointment on cuts or scrapes. Keep wounds covered and clean until they are fully healed.
- Avoid contact with other people's wounds or bandages.
- Check your skin regularly for red areas, pimples, boils, or other signs of MRSA. If you find something, contact a healthcare provider for treatment.

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## Can MRSA be spread through sexual contact? Are men who have sex with men (MSM) at greater risk?

MRSA transmission is not directly related to having vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Condoms cannot fully protect you from exposure to MRSA — they only protect the skin they cover and cannot prevent other skin-to-skin contact.

Several recent studies have found high rates of MRSA among MSM in several U.S. cities. Many of these men had a type of MRSA that is very resistant to antibiotics. However, this MRSA strain also has been found in persons who are not MSM.

## Is MRSA more dangerous for people with HIV?

Yes. People who are HIV-positive get infected with MRSA more often than the general population. People with weakened immune systems and chronic diseases (like HIV infection) and people who take antibiotics often are more likely to become infected with MRSA. People with HIV are more likely to become infected with MRSA if they:

- Have CD4 cell counts of 50 or lower and have high viral loads.
- Use intravenous drugs and share injection equipment.
- Had been hospitalized numerous times in the past year.
- Have had multiple sex partners or needle-sharing partners.

## If you are HIV positive, take these steps to protect yourself from MRSA:

- Wash up as soon as you can after having sex.
- Don't share personal items like razors or tooth brushes.
- Don't share needles or other drug-injection equipment.
- Practice safe sex. A condom cannot fully protect you from MRSA, but it can prevent you from infecting a partner or being infected by HIV and many STDs.
- Limit the number of partners you have sex with.



MRSA abscess

## More information on MRSA:

New York State Department of Health

[www.nyhealth.gov/diseases/communicable/staphylococcus\\_aureus/methicillin\\_resistant/](http://www.nyhealth.gov/diseases/communicable/staphylococcus_aureus/methicillin_resistant/)

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/ar\\_mrsa\\_ca.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/ar_mrsa_ca.html)