

October 23, 2007

Dear concerned resident:

In response to media coverage of methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) infections around the country this past week, the Hightstown Health Department is providing this important information to our residents. We understand that hearing about a “super bug” can be very frightening, particularly to parents. However it is important to keep in mind a few key facts about MRSA:

- MRSA is not a new disease. It has been a challenge to healthcare providers and the public health community since the 1960s. It was first primarily associated with hospitals. In the last several years, it has also become increasingly common in the community.
- MRSA is a type of bacterial infection that is resistant to **some, but not all** antibiotics. **It is treatable.**
- MRSA can cause skin infections. These infections result in redness, warmth, swelling, and tenderness. Often a MRSA infection will look like a spider bite, boil, abscess, or turf burn. If you or a family member has any of these symptoms, please contact your health care provider.
- If you are prescribed antibiotics, it is critical to take them as prescribed until finished, even if you start to feel better or your condition improves.
- MRSA infections are usually spread by skin-to-skin contact or by direct contact with the drainage from the wound. They may also be spread by contact with contaminated surfaces or things such as sports equipment or personal hygiene items.
- MRSA skin infections are NOT spread through the air.
- People who are infected with MRSA are permitted to attend school/work as long as they are compliant with infection control measures. Skin infections should be kept clean and bandaged.

I offer you the following recommendations on how to prevent MRSA infections;

- Educate yourself about MRSA and preventive behaviors.
- Encourage frequent hand washing. Any kind of soap is fine for hand washing. It does not need to be antibacterial.
- Encourage proper personal hygiene such as showering after sporting activities, wearing clean clothing, etc.
- Discourage the sharing of personal items such as clothing, towels, bar soap, sports equipment, etc.
- Ensure proper cleaning of surfaces with 1/4 cup of bleach mixed into one gallon of water, or use an EPA approved disinfectant known to kill bacteria. Most common over the counter disinfectants will be effective if they have an EPA registration number on the label and state that they are effective in killing bacteria.

- Make sure all wounds are bandaged properly.
- Consult your health care provider for evaluation of any suspicious skin lesion.

Please be aware of the signs and symptoms of MRSA. The Hightstown Health Department has posted information on the Hightstown Borough website which will act as a resource for you at [www.hightstownborough.com](http://www.hightstownborough.com) MRSA is treatable. However, if it is left untreated, it can become a serious illness.

Please be assured that the staff at the Hightstown Health Department are working with all the appropriate stakeholders to investigate every concern, minimize exposure and act as a resource for you. If you have any questions, I encourage you to contact the Hightstown Health Department at (609) 936-8400.

Sincerely,

*Robert Hary, Health Officer*

# WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ... MRSA

## WHAT IS STAPH?

*Staphylococcus aureus*, or “*staph*”, bacteria are one of the most frequent causes of skin infections in the U.S. These skin infections are minor most of the time, but *staph* can also cause serious wound infections, bloodstream infections and pneumonia.

*Staph* are often found on the skin or in the noses of healthy people and do not usually cause illness. *Staph* can cause minor skin infections such as pimples or boils that can be red, swollen and painful, and often have pus or other drainage. These infections can be treated by a health care provider by draining the wound and/or antibiotics.

## WHAT IS MRSA?

Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, or *MRSA*, are a type of *staph* that are resistant to certain antibiotics, making them more difficult to treat. While between 25-30 percent of healthy people are colonized with *staph* (when bacteria are present, but not causing an infection), approximately one percent are colonized with *MRSA*.

In the past, *MRSA* was usually seen in hospitals, long term care facilities and prisons. However, community-associated *MRSA* (*CA-MRSA*) is becoming more prevalent in the general population especially among children, care givers in day care centers, and athletes.

An infection with *staph* and *MRSA* bacteria can appear the same. A sample must be sent to a laboratory and tested to see which antibiotics will be effective for treating the infection.

It is possible to have a *staph* or *MRSA* skin infection come back (recur) after it is cured. To prevent this from happening, follow your health care provider's directions while you have the infection, and then protect yourself after the infection is gone.

## 10 FACTS ABOUT MRSA

- 1 Anyone can get *MRSA*. Even healthy people with healthy skin can become infected.
- 2 People can become infected with *MRSA* by touching an infected person or contaminated objects and surfaces. The bacteria can then enter the body through cuts, scrapes or other openings in the skin.
- 3 Even though *MRSA* skin infections are resistant to certain antibiotics, early diagnosis and treatment can stop the infection from getting worse.
- 4 *MRSA* can spread easily among people who spend time in close contact with each other, such as household members and participants in close-contact sports like football or wrestling.
- 5 *MRSA* is NOT spread through droplets in the air like a cold or flu.
- 6 High risk behaviors for contact with *MRSA* include:
  - ◆ Sharing personal care items such as razors, bar soap, cosmetics, towels, athletic gear, or syringes
  - ◆ Getting tattoos or body piercings with unsterile equipment
  - ◆ Any sexual activity or close physical contact with a *MRSA*-infected person
- 7 Cover skin infections with clean bandages. Pus and drainage from the infection can easily spread to others.

- 8 People with weakened immune systems, including those with HIV infection, may be at risk for more severe illnesses if they are infected with MRSA.
- 9 MRSA usually causes minor skin infections such as pimples or boils. They are often mistaken for spider bites. Left untreated, these infections can get worse and spread to the bloodstream or lungs, causing serious illness and possibly death. Seek medical attention if you suspect a *MRSA* skin infection.
- 10 Tell all your health care providers if you have a history of *MRSA* skin infection.

## PROTECT YOURSELF FROM MRSA

- ◆ Cover all cuts, scratches or scrapes with a clean bandage to protect the non-intact skin from all bacteria, not just *MRSA*.
- ◆ Keep your hands clean by washing thoroughly with soap and hot water, or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- ◆ Don't share personal items such as razors, toothbrushes, towels, uniforms and equipment, or similar items.
- ◆ Avoid contact with other people's wounds or bandages.
- ◆ Shower after playing sports or going to a gym or health club.
- ◆ If possible, place a barrier (towel or clothing) between your skin and shared equipment such as mats, weight benches, or treadmill handles. Wipe the surface of equipment before and after you use it with a disinfectant.
- ◆ Wash bedding, towels and clothes that may have had contact with infected skin, wound or bandage with detergent or bleach and hot water. Dry these items in a hot air dryer to help kill the bacteria.

## TAKE ANTIBIOTICS WISELY

Two main pathogens (germs) - bacteria and viruses - cause most infections. Antibiotics can only cure illnesses caused by bacteria ... they cannot kill viruses.

Each time we take antibiotics, sensitive bacteria are killed, but a few resistant ones are left to grow and multiply, passing their resistance to future generations of the mutated bacteria. These bacteria have learned ways to become immune to the effect of antibiotics, becoming *antibiotic* or *antimicrobial resistant*.

Take medicine as prescribed by your health care provider - **ALWAYS** complete the full course of antibiotics, even if you are feeling better before the medicine is finished. Never save some of the medicine to treat yourself or others later.

Viruses cause most sore throats, colds and the flu, as well as coughs (bronchitis), and many middle ear and sinus infections. Recovery from a viral illness only occurs when the infection has run its course.

**NEVER TAKE ANTIBIOTICS FOR A VIRAL INFECTION.** If your health care provider says you do not have a bacterial infection, do not demand that he prescribe an antibiotic.

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**HIGHTSTOWN HEALTH DEPARTMENT**  
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