

Infection Prevention and You



What is *S. aureus* and how does it spread?

Staphylococcus aureus or “staph” is a type of bacteria found on human skin, in the nose, armpit, groin, and other areas. While these germs don’t always cause harm, they can make you sick under the right circumstances. *S. aureus* is the leading cause of skin and soft tissue infections, such as abscesses, boils, furuncles, and cellulitis (red, swollen, painful, warm skin). *S. aureus* germs can also cause more serious infections, such as pneumonia, bloodstream infections, endocarditis (infection of the inner lining of the heart chambers and heart valves), and bone and joint infections.

S. aureus is spread by touching infected blood or body fluids, most often by contaminated hands.

Who gets *S. aureus* infections?

Anyone can develop a *S. aureus* infection, although certain groups of people are more likely than others. This includes people with conditions such as: diabetes, cancer, vascular disease, eczema, lung disease, and people who inject drugs. Patients who are hospitalized in intensive care units (ICUs), patients who have undergone certain types of surgeries, and patients with medical devices inserted in their bodies, such as central lines and catheters, are at greater risk of a more serious *S. aureus* infection. People who often visit healthcare facilities and nursing home residents are also at an increased risk.

What are the symptoms of *S. aureus* infections?

S. aureus infections typically appear on the skin as a pocket of pus surrounded by red, painful skin, or cellulitis.

How is *S. aureus* treated?

Treatment depends on the type of infection caused by the bacteria. When antibiotics are prescribed, they are selected based on laboratory testing of the bacteria and may involve more than one type.

Staph bacteria are very adaptable, and many varieties have become resistant to one or more antibiotics. The rise of antibiotic-resistant strains of staph bacteria—often described as methicillin-resistant *S. aureus* (MRSA) strains—has led to the use of IV antibiotics, with the potential for more side effects.

How can you prevent *S. aureus* infections?

To prevent staph infections, practice proper hand hygiene, keep infected areas covered and clean, and avoid sharing personal items like razors, towels, and needles.

Additional resources

APIC—Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*: <https://apic.org/Resources/Topic-specific-infection-prevention/Methicillin-resistant-Staphylococcus-aureus>

CDC—*Staphylococcus aureus* in healthcare settings: <https://www.cdc.gov/hai/organisms/staph.html>

Minnesota Department of Health—About *Staphylococcus aureus*:
<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/staph/basics.html>