

Are You Protecting Workers from MRSA Infections?



In many workplaces, the primary threat is that workers could get injured, hurt or killed. But in some industries, workplace hazards may pose an equal or even greater threat to workers' *health*. In other words, workers are at risk of becoming sick or contracting an infection.

One kind of health hazard that certain workplaces need to be aware of and protect workers from is Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), which is a type of staph infection that's resistant to antibiotics. Staph skin infections, including MRSA, usually start as a bump on the skin that may be red, warm, swollen, full of pus or painful. They may look like a pimple, boil or spider bite. And although MRSA may start as a minor skin infection, it can become serious and sometimes even fatal.

Although MRSA is primarily a hazard in the healthcare sector, workplaces in other industries are also at risk, including:

- Schools;
- Dormitories;
- Military barracks;
- Correctional facilities;
- Daycare centers; and
- Workplaces with locker rooms and showers.

So if your workplace could expose workers to the risk of a MRSA infection, NIOSH has answers to frequently asked questions about these infections and how to protect workers:

Can workers get MRSA at work'

MRSA is transmitted most often by direct skin-to-skin contact or contact with shared items or surfaces that have come into contact with someone else's infection, such as towels or used bandages.

MRSA skin infections can occur anywhere. But some settings have factors that make it easier for MRSA to be transmitted. These factors'referred to as the 5 C's'are:

1. Crowding;
2. Frequent skin-to-skin Contact;
3. Compromised skin (such as cuts or abrasions);
4. Contaminated items and surfaces; and
5. Lack of Cleanliness.

Should we bar workers who have MRSA from the workplace'

Unless directed by a healthcare provider, workers with MRSA infections shouldn't be routinely excluded from going to work. Exclusion from work should be reserved for those with wound drainage ('pus') that can't be covered and contained with a clean, dry bandage and for those who can't maintain good hygiene practices. Workers with active infections should be excluded from activities where skin-to-skin contact with the affected skin area is likely to occur until their infections are healed.

How do workers with MRSA skin infections prevent spreading it at work'

Workers can prevent spreading MRSA to others by doing the following:

Covering the wound. Keep areas of the skin affected by MRSA covered. Keep wounds that are draining or have pus covered with clean, dry bandages. Pus from infected wounds can contain MRSA, so keeping the infection covered will help prevent the spread to others. Discard used bandages or tape with the regular trash.

Washing their hands. Infected workers and others in close contact with them should wash their hands frequently with soap and warm water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, especially after changing the bandage or touching the infected wound.

Not sharing personal items. Workers with MRSA should avoid sharing personal items such as uniforms, PPE, clothing, towels, washcloths or razors that may have had contact with the infected wound or bandage.

What should we do if we think a worker's uniform, clothing, PPE or workstation has become contaminated with MRSA'

Wash uniforms, clothing, sheets and towels with water and laundry detergent. Drying clothes in a hot dryer, rather than air-drying, also helps kill bacteria. So use a dryer to dry clothes completely. Cleaning contaminated equipment and surfaces with detergent-based cleaners or disinfectants is effective at removing MRSA from the environment.

What other steps should employers take to prevent the spread of MRSA at the workplace'

Employers should ensure:

- That worker health protection is a priority in the workplace
- The availability of adequate facilities and supplies that encourage workers to practice good hygiene
- That routine housekeeping in the workplace is followed
- That surfaces contaminated with MRSA pus or blood are cleaned and disinfected

- The availability of PPE and first aid supplies.

If you fail to take adequate steps to protect vulnerable workers from MRSA, you could face a backlash from workers and compliance orders from the government:

Example: A worker at a sleep lab complained to the MOL about working with patients who were resistant to antibiotics and could have a contagious form of MRSA, claiming that PPE, infection control practices and training as to MRSA were inadequate. After an inspection, an MOL officer issued an order requiring the lab to provide adequate PPE and written procedures for the wearing of PPE to protect against MRSA. The lab challenged the order, saying it had taken adequate safety measures. But the Board refused to suspend the order pending appeal, noting that doing so could endanger worker safety [*Accqcorp v. Matthie*, [2012] CanLII 38160 (ON LRB), July 6, 2012].