Preventing staphylococcal skin infections

What is Staphylococcus aureus?

*Staphylococcus aureus* (commonly called Staph, or Staph aureus) is a type of bacteria, which is found on the skin and in the noses of about a quarter of healthy people. Usually Staph is harmless and not noticeable, but if the skin becomes damaged, such as with a scratch or even a minor cut or graze, it can cause skin infections such as boils and abscesses. Children who have eczema are more susceptible to skin infections because it is more likely that their skin will get dry and crack when scratched.

Why do some people get recurrent Staph infections?

Some people are more prone than others to getting recurrent Staph infections. This does not usually mean that you have any problem with your immunity but that you have more Staph on your skin or up your nose, or you have a more aggressive type of Staph, which means you keep getting infections. Over time, which can be up to two years, you will develop an immunity to Staph and the infections will settle.

In families or in other close settings, for example, schools, preschools, sports clubs, and residential care facilities, Staph infections can easily spread from person to person so that a number of people in one place can get infected. However, there may be some people who remain well and do not have any obvious infections but will still carry Staph in their nose or on parts of the body, for example, the groin. These people can spread the infection to others.

What can I, and my family, do to avoid getting recurrent Staph infections?

1) Make sure any other skin conditions such as eczema, psoriasis, or tinea (athlete’s foot) are under control.

2) If you, or anyone in the household has an infected cut or sore, make sure that it is covered with a plaster. This will help stop it infecting other parts of the body and stop it spreading to other people. Any type of plaster is fine.

3) Wash hands properly with liquid soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand gel, taking care to clean between fingers and up to the wrists.

4) Have regular baths or showers. Instead of using soap, use an antiseptic skin cleanser. Follow these tips:
   - Wash all over your body, including between toes and around your bottom, under your arms and into the groin area, and into any skin folds.
   - Use on your hair and scalp when washing your hair.
   - Leave the antiseptic on your skin for at least five minutes before washing off.

   Types of antiseptic cleanser are:
   - Triclosan 1% skin cleanser, which your doctor can prescribe.
   - Chlorhexidine 4% (surgical scrub preparation). This costs about $15 to $17 for a 500 ml bottle. As this can be drying on your skin, you may also need to use an emollient or moisturiser if your skin is dry.
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- Chlorhexidine 1% (obstetric cream preparation), which is often better for infants, children, and elderly people with sensitive skin. It can be applied to all areas of the skin and rinsed off in the bath or shower. This product costs about $20 to $25 for a 200 ml bottle.

You can also use a dilute bleach bath. Add ¼ cup (about 60 ml) of household bleach to a quarter-filled bath and stir well. If you don't have a bath, use 1 teaspoon to 4 litres of water in a bucket. Do this for 15 minutes twice a week. This bleach bath can be easier for children than using an antiseptic cleanser.

5) Keep fingernails clean and short.
6) Don't share razors, towels, facecloths, toothbrushes, containers of creams or ointments, make-up, or other personal items.
7) Throw away used razors. Also throw away any skin creams or make-up that might have been contaminated.
8) When using creams or ointments from a container, use a clean stick or spoon to remove the amount you need. This avoids contaminating the whole container.

How can I protect my home?

- Clean hard surfaces, including bathrooms and floors with detergent and water.
- Vacuum carpets, rugs, and mattresses.
- Wash all sheets, towels, and underwear regularly, preferably in hot water.
- Wash pet bedding regularly, especially dog bedding. Dogs can carry Staph infections without themselves showing any sign.

Treating a Staph infection

- Keep the sore or infected area covered with a dressing/plaster until it has healed up.
- Don't scratch the area, and avoid touching it. Wash your hands well after touching the infected area.
- Don't let anyone else touch the infected area.
- Clean the infected area with water every day and cover again with a clean dressing/plaster.
- If your doctor has given you antibiotics, finish the course as directed.
- See your doctor or practice nurse if the infected area or sore:
  - is larger than the size of a 10 cent coin (approximately 1.5 cm).
  - is getting bigger.
  - has pus.
  - has red streaks coming from it,
  - is not getting any better after two days.
  - is near an eye.

Local health professionals recommend the following pages.

- Ministry of Health – Looking after your child’s skin and treating skin infections
  A 24-page PDF explaining how to keep children’s skin healthy, and how to treat common childhood skin infections. Find it at www.health.govt.nz and search on “caring for your child’s skin infection”.

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