Preventing & treating Staphylococcal skin infections

Staphylococcus aureus (commonly called Staph or Staph aureus) is a type of bacteria (germ). It's on the skin and in the noses of about a quarter of healthy people.

Staph is usually harmless, and you don't even notice it. But if your skin is damaged with a scratch or even a small cut or graze, it can cause skin infections such as boils and abscesses.

Children who have eczema are more likely to get skin infections because it's more likely that their skin will get dry and crack when they scratch it.

Repeat Staph infections

Some people get repeat Staph infections while others around them don't. If this happens to you, it usually doesn't mean you have a problem with your immunity. It usually just means that you have more Staph on your skin or up your nose, or you have a more aggressive type of Staph. Over time, which can be up to two years, you'll develop immunity to Staph and will stop getting so many infections.

In families, schools, preschools, sports clubs, and residential care facilities, Staph infections can easily spread from person to person, so several people get infected. But some of them may stay well and not show any signs of infection, even though they carry Staph in their nose or other parts of their body. These people can spread the infection to others.

Avoiding repeat Staph infections

- Make sure you treat any other skin conditions, such as eczema, psoriasis, or tinea (athlete's foot).
- If you or anyone in the house has an infected cut or sore, cover it with a plaster. This will help stop it infecting other parts of your body and stop it spreading to other people. Any type of plaster is fine.
- Wash your hands properly with liquid soap and water, or an alcohol-based hand gel, taking care to clean between your fingers and up to your wrists. See the HealthInfo (healthinfo.org.nz) page on Hand hygiene to find out when you should wash your hands and how to wash them properly.
- Have a bath or shower at least daily, and more often if you do very sweaty activities. If you have dry skin and aren't very active, a bath or shower every second day should be OK. Wash all over your body with soap, including between your toes, around your bottom, under your arms, into your groin area, and into any skin folds.
- Keep your fingernails clean and short.
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- Don't share razors, towels, facecloths, toothbrushes, containers of creams or ointments, make-up, or other personal items with anyone else in the house.
- Throw away any used razors. Also throw away any skin creams or make-up that might have been contaminated.
- If you use creams or ointments from a container, use a new clean stick or spoon every time to remove the amount you need. This stops you contaminating the whole container.

Protecting your home

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

How often you do this depends on how many people are in your household and how dirty things get. For example, a family of eight in a three-bedroom house should vacuum and clean every second day. An elderly couple may only need to vacuum and clean once every two weeks. Change towels and sheets weekly. Change underwear daily.

Treating a Staph infection

- Keep the sore or infected area covered with a dressing or 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 it again with a clean dressing or plaster.
- If your GP has given you antibiotics, finish the course as directed.
- See your GP 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
  - isn't getting any better after two days
  - is near one of your eyes.

HealthInfo recommends the following pages

- Ministry of Health – Looking after your child's skin and treating skin infections
  A 24-page booklet 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 for “caring for your child’s skin infection”.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Page created August 2018.