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Protecting Yourself

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Simple ways to protect yourself from infection.

Staphylococcus aureus bacteria are often harmless, “colonizing” the skin of one to every three or four people in the population, but causing no disease. Colonized people can unknowingly spread the bacteria, however, triggering infection in more vulnerable people, such as those with compromised immune systems or open wounds.

Infections occur when drug-resistant Staphylococcus aureus bacteria enter the body and multiply, which triggers an immune response. Dangerous MRSA infections invade the body deeply, causing pneumonia in the lungs, serious infections in surgical wounds, or deadly bloodstream infections. Basic hygiene can ward off most infections, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and include:

- **Keep hands clean** by washing with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- **Keep cuts clean** and covered with a bandage until healed.
- **Avoid touching** other people’s wounds or bandages.
- **Do not share personal items**, such as towels or razors.

Recent studies show plain soap may be just as effective as antibacterial soap in wiping out bacteria. In fact, antibacterial products may actually be worse, according to laboratory research published in the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*. While plain soap and alcohol-based products lift bacteria off the skin so that it can be rinsed away, antibacterial products contain a chemical called triclosan that may end up leaving more resistant bacteria behind. However, when the two types of soaps were compared in real-life settings, no difference in bacteria resistance was seen.

The CDC has found clusters of MRSA in certain populations and places. Skin infection outbreaks occur among athletes, military recruits, and prisoners—often spread by skin-to-skin contact in crowded or unsanitary conditions.

Most importantly for cancer patients, the agency has found MRSA in health care settings, such as hospitals and long-term care centers, where heavy use of antibiotics can lead to the growth of antibiotic-resistant staph.

Precautions in health care settings are similar, but patients should not only wash

their own hands regularly, they should also inquire if their health care providers are doing so. When someone is inserting an intravenous tube or catheter, that person should wear gloves and a mask and sterilize your skin first.

For more about MRSA prevention, visit the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease's website at www3.niaid.nih.gov.