

Superbug Epidemic: How to Protect Yourself

When you go into the hospital for illness or injury, you expect to come out feeling better—not sicker. Regrettably, that's not the case for the growing number of Americans who contract hospital-related infections every year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 1.7 million people are affected each year—and 100,000 of them die.

Normally, the bacteria that cause infections are easily wiped out with antibiotic treatment. But stronger strains, such as *C. diff* and MRSA, are becoming more prevalent in hospitals, nursing homes and other care facilities. These so-called “superbugs” are resistant to antibiotics, making them difficult to treat, particularly in the elderly.

“We rely on the body's immune system to help fight infections,” explains Arjun Srinivasan, M.D., associate director for Healthcare Associated Infection Prevention Programs at the CDC's division of health care quality promotion. “So if your own immune system is weakened or ineffective, simply relying on antibiotics makes it harder.”

The latest villain in the superbug clan is known as CRE, which was first seen in the U.S. in 2001. Although its presence has been limited to hospitals and nursing homes so far, doctors fear that it may spread more widely. In addition to being potentially deadly, CRE also has the ability to transfer its resistance gene to less harmful bacteria—making even a simple infection hard to treat.

Compounding the problem is the hospital setting itself. In addition to being surrounded by other sick people, patients risk contracting infections via everything from bed linens to visitors who don't wash their hands. Invasive devices such as

IVs, ventilators and catheters, which stay in the body for days, can make for an easy pathway into the bloodstream for bacteria.

So how do you protect yourself against these dangerous superbugs? When you are in the hospital as a patient or a visitor, keeping your hands clean helps stop the spread of infection.

“It starts with careful attention to washing your hands,” Srinivasan told Newsmax Health.

Another important measure is to take antibiotics only when necessary, such as for an infected wound or a urinary tract infection. Some patients insist on taking the drugs for colds and flu, which does nothing for the illness and makes the body more resistant to the effects of the drug.

“If your provider tells you that you don’t need an antibiotic, respect that,” Srinivasan says.

If you’re scheduled to go to the hospital for surgery or another medical procedure, there are additional ways to protect yourself. Here are some of the steps recommended by the nonprofit organization Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths. (To see the full list, visit):

- Stop smoking well in advance of your surgery date. Smoking increases the risk of infection threefold.
- Ask your doctor to give you the nasal-swab test for MRSA a week prior to the procedure.
- Shower or bathe with chlorhexidine soap three to five days before surgery to remove any harmful bacteria on your skin.
- In the hospital, insist that all staff and visitors use hand sanitizer when they come into your room.
- Have hair around the surgery site removed with clippers. Razors can nick the skin and create an entryway for bacteria.

- Ask about taking an antibiotic an hour before surgery to prevent infection.
- Be careful with IVs. Make sure the area is cleaned and that the caretaker has clean hands before inserting the needle. An IV should be changed at least every three to four days.
- If you need a catheter, ask to have it removed as soon as possible. Catheters can push deadly bacteria deep into the body.
- Wash your hands (or use sanitizer) before eating, and keep your food and utensils on your plate. and other germs can live on just about any surface, including your bed sheets and tray table.
- Bring along bleach wipes for wiping down bedrails, doorknobs, the TV remote and other places germs can lurk.

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