

MRSA: What Therapy Dog Handlers Should Know about the Superbug



What is MRSA?

MRSA stands for Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus. It is a common bacteria, often referred to as a hospital 'superbug,' that tends to affect people with a weak immune system or those who have taken many antibiotics. It can also affect dogs. MRSA is difficult to treat because it has developed resistance to modern antibiotics. In Canada, there were approximately 36,000 cases of MRSA reported in 2010 and 2,200 MRSA-related deaths.

How is MRSA spread?

MRSA is often found on the skin and in the nose of healthy people and many, unknowingly, can be carriers. It is carried on clothes and other objects. MRSA survives on regular surfaces and on hands for some time. It can be spread through touch (direct contact) or through the air (sneezing or coughing). However, MRSA is easy to kill with proper use of disinfectants and good hand-washing.

University of Guelph Findings

In 2007, OTD agreed to participate in a University of Guelph study that investigated whether MRSA and another superbug, C. difficile, could be passed between therapy dogs and patients. The study found both bugs may have been transferred to the fur and paws of these animals through patients handling or kissing the dogs, shaking paws with the pet or through exposure to a contaminated healthcare environment. Recommendations were for hand-washing for patients and therapy dog handlers after visits. Also, dogs should be wiped down. It should be noted that no transfer was found with OTD dogs. Our teams were considered to be the gold standard - in part because of our ongoing vigilance in education and training.

How to Keep You and Your Dog Safe

- Wash your hands scrupulously before and after therapy dog visits.
- Never enter a room where a patient has MRSA. Watch for signs posted around or outside a patient's room.
- Make sure your OTD dog is well groomed and clean.
- Never visit if you or your dog are unwell or have any open wounds or cuts.
- Check with your contact person on site prior to each visit or upon arrival to determine if MRSA has been reported and if any rooms are "off limits."
- Wipe down your dog using an alcohol-based cloth before and after your visits.
- Avoid tricks such as "Shake a Paw." These tricks put your dog's feet in direct contact with a patient's skin. Also avoid having your dog lick a patient.

- Be aware MRSA can be present on doorknobs, wheelchairs, walker handles and other objects in an infected space.

Good Hand-Washing Techniques

Alcohol-based hand rubs provide rapid kill or removal of most transient microorganisms, including MRSA. These products contain a variety of alcohols in concentrations from 60-90%.

The proper way to use hand rubs:

1. Squirt a loonie-sized amount on the palm of your hand.
2. Spread it over the surfaces of your hands, concentrating on the fingertips, between the fingers, the back of the hands and the base of the thumbs.
3. Rub your hands well until the product is dry.
4. Remember, long nails may put you at additional risk. Artificial nails should not be worn. Jewelry such as rings and bracelets can hinder effective hand hygiene.

How does MRSA affect animals?

The bacteria can cause infection in an animal if it finds its way into a cut or graze. It can cause skin infections or, more seriously, internal infections. MRSA is resistant to many antibiotics.

Check it out....

Every facility will have policies and procedures about MRSA. Be sure to check before you begin your placement. Ask questions to protect yourself, your dog and your clients.

For Further Information

The Bella Moss Foundation at www.thebellamossfoundation.com
Science News, Pet Therapy Dogs May Carry MRSA and Clostridium Difficile Between Patients, at www.sciencedaily.com

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Good dogs doing great work!

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