

[page](#)

Doctors' Number-1 Tip to Prevent This Serious Kind of Infection

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The *Staphylococcus* bacteria that cause [staph infections](#) are with you always, minding their own business as they live on your skin and in your nose, per the [Cleveland Clinic](#). But if they get inside your body, via a cut, skin infection, or contaminated food, for example, they can cause problems like blisters and sores, digestive woes, and potentially more serious ailments like toxic shock syndrome and sepsis. Fortunately, experts say it's easy to prevent a staph infection—and the keys are personal hygiene practices that you're likely already doing to keep yourself healthy and avoid viruses and infections in your daily life.

Meet the experts: [Paul Fey, Ph.D.](#), the associate director of the Center for Staphylococcal Research at the University of Nebraska Medical Center; [David Cennimo, M.D.](#), assistant professor of medicine-pediatrics infectious disease at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School; [Joshua Zeichner, M.D.](#), director of cosmetic and clinical research in dermatology at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City; [Richard Watkins, M.D.](#), infectious diseases physician and a professor of internal medicine at Northeast Ohio Medical University; [Gary Goldenberg, M.D.](#), assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital.

Here, doctors share the simple strategies that will keep the *Staphylococcus* bacteria from making you sick—plus when it might be worthwhile to give your provider a call if you suspect you have contracted a staph infection.

3 ways to prevent a staph infection

Wash your hands.

[Washing your hands thoroughly](#) and often—especially when you'll be handling food or touching a wound or broken skin—is the best way to prevent a staph infection, said [Paul Fey, Ph.D.](#), the associate director of the Center for Staphylococcal Research at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

If you need to go to the doctor's office or to a hospital, for any reason, make sure that everybody that is seeing you is washing their hands too, said [David Cennimo, M.D.](#), assistant professor of medicine-pediatrics infectious disease at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School. According to the [Swedish Institute College of Health Sciences](#), the risk of a more serious staph infection is higher in healthcare facilities than out in public, thanks to the array of bacteria present and the number of open wounds and invasive procedures taking place. "It's ok to ask 'did you wash your hands?'" Dr. Cennimo said, adding that alcohol hand sanitizers can do just as well.

Keep cuts clean.

Cuts and open wounds provide a doorway through which staph bacteria can get into your body, so you want to keep them as clean as possible. "Make sure you tend to any open skin by cleaning the area, applying [over-the-counter antibiotic ointment](#) and then covering with a bandage to protect the area," said [Joshua Zeichner, M.D.](#), director of cosmetic and clinical research in dermatology at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City.

You should also try to keep broken skin (such as itchy rashes, cuts, and sores) away from gym equipment and other surfaces that may be harboring bacteria. "Do not share personal care products like razors, as they can spread bacteria, and avoid direct contact of the skin with someone who has crusts, scabs, or signs of an active infection themselves," Dr. Zeichner added.

Go gentle in the shower.

While you may be tempted to give yourself an intense scrubbing in the shower to optimize your hygiene, especially if you have a cut or a sore that you're trying to keep from getting infected, it's not recommended. "Don't dry out your skin or scrub too hard in the shower because if you have dry cracked skin, bacteria can hide in those cracks," said Dr. Cennimo. Not only can they hide, but they can use cracks as an entry point into your body the same way they can use cuts and other wounds. So after your shower or following any kind of exfoliation, be sure to moisturize!

When to see a doctor if you're worried about a staph infection.

Early signs of a staph infection, according to [NYU Langone Health](#), typically include skin redness, warmth, swelling, tenderness, and blisters. If you notice any of these, especially accompanied by a high fever or signs of systemic infection (fever, chills, change in activity level) you should seek urgent medical care, said Dr. Cennimo. "Things that look like a skin infection that are lasting more than a day that are expanding rapidly, that are making you have a fever, that are particularly painful, you really need to be evaluated."

Also, if someone you have had contact with has a staph infection and you have new symptoms on your skin, seeing a doctor would be a good idea, added

[Richard Watkins, M.D.](#), infectious diseases physician and a professor of internal medicine at Northeast Ohio Medical University. Staph bacteria can be spread from person to person through skin-to-skin contact, according to the [Mayo Clinic](#). It can also live on hand towels and clothes long enough to transfer to the next person to touch them.

If you have [eczema](#), make sure it's treated and see a doctor if you have any uncontrolled or infected-looking flare-ups, said [Gary Goldenberg, M.D.](#), assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of

Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital. Skin damage from a particularly bad eczema flare-up can up your risk of contracting a staph infection, per the [Mayo Clinic](#).

Unless you have an angry skin boil or blemish, spotting a staph infection is going to be difficult, since the symptoms can overlap with all sorts of health conditions, Dr. Fey said. When in doubt, see your doctor, who can give you a proper diagnosis and treatment plan.

Additional reporting by Korin Miller and Madeleine Haase
