

Is My Pet's Skin Infection Contagious?

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Staph bacteria is a common cause of skin infections in dogs. Staph bacteria can also cause infections in cats, humans and other mammals. There are different types of Staph bacteria. The scientific name for Staph is *Staphylococcus*. Dogs and cats typically have *Staphylococcus pseudintermedius* (*S. pseudintermedius*). Humans typically have *Staphylococcus aureus* (*S. aureus*). *S. pseudintermedius* does not infect humans unless there are unusual circumstances. *S. aureus* does not infect dogs and cats unless there are unusual circumstances.

Staph infections in dogs and cats are not contagious to humans in the vast majority of cases. The risk of transmission of Staph from a pet to a person is even less likely if good hand washing is practiced.

There are some cases where it is possible to transfer Staph from a pet to a person. If a person has a very compromised immune system (for example: a new born baby, a hospitalized person or a person receiving chemotherapy), they may be at increased risk for contracting an infection. However, even people with a compromised immune system are at low risk of contracting a Staph infection from their pet as long as they wash their hands. Another situation by which a person could contract a Staph infection from their pet is if the person has an open wound that comes into contact with the pet's infected skin. If the wound comes into contact with the pet's skin infection and then the wound is not washed, it is possible that the pet's Staph could spread to the human.

What about MRSA?

MRSA stands for Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*. Pets usually do not have MRSA, but they can have MRSP (Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus pseudintermedius*). 'Methicillin-Resistant' means that the particular strain of Staph bacteria is resistant to several families of antibiotics. Sometimes Staph bacteria can be resistant to nearly every type of antibiotic available. MRSA typically affects humans, but only in unusual situations does it affect dogs and cats.

Staph bacteria has the ability to share its DNA with other Staph. It is possible for MRSP to share DNA with *S. aureus* on a human. When MRSP shares its DNA, it can turn *S. aureus* into MRSA. The reverse is also possible. MRSA can share its DNA with *S. pseudintermedius* and turn it into MRSP. This is important because studies show that it is possible for pet owners to temporarily, asymptotically carry MRSA while their pet has an MRSP infection. When this happens, most people do not even know that they had MRSA temporarily on their skin. For healthy people, temporary carriage of MRSA does not lead to infection. Studies also show that when the pet's MRSP skin infection resolves, the MRSA on the humans also resolves.

What does all of this mean?

The take away message is that your pet's skin infection is not contagious in the vast majority of situations. Pet owners should wash their hands after touching their pet's skin infection.

