

“Flesh eating” Staph infections, animals and us.

Dr. Paul Cadogan

“Flesh eating bacteria”! Ouch!! The thought strikes fear into our hearts, but, yes, a type of bacteria that lives naturally in our bodies can turn into a monstrous opportunist in a wound and threaten life itself.

Staphylococcus aureus is part of the “normal” bacterial flora of the human body. It lives on our skin, in our noses and other unmentionable places and normally does no harm. But, when it gets a chance, it can grow and cause infection.

Over the years, the regular use of antibiotics to treat various infections has allowed this germ to adapt like the Borg of Star Trek. It can become resistant to most if not all of the antibiotics we have available. When this happens, it is called MRSA – short for Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*. Infections caused by MRSA in humans can be extremely difficult to treat, causing destruction of tissue and loss of limbs and even life itself.

But where do animals fit in this equation – especially our pets that are in such close contact with us. Well, the truth is, dogs can and do carry *S. aureus* – but only when they catch it from US! Yes, we humans transmit the germ to our pets, and it can then spread from them to other people!

Dogs have another species of *Staphylococcus* – *S. intermedius* as part of their normal bacterial flora and only the constant transfer of its cousin from people makes them have both. Keep a dog away from people and any *S. aureus* it is carrying disappears.

So how do we prevent the spread of MRSA? The simple strategy is the ever-important act of regular, effective hand washing with good old soap and water, and the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers.

In washing hands, you should take at least 20 seconds – rub your palms, the back of the hands, the wrists, between the fingers, along the fingers and nails and rinse under clean, running water. With sanitizer, wet your hands thoroughly all around and allow it to evaporate. Don’t wipe it off.

With clean hands, you have increased your safety from the transmission of many diseases. No antibiotics needed!

