Night of the Living Superbug

Is the MRSA staph superbug stalking black folks?

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Bugging out.
The drug-resistant staph bug MRSA (methicillin–resistant staphylococcus aureus) spreads through contact with skin or personal-care objects like towels or razors. Though its transmission may seem ordinary, its impact is not. In October 2007, a federal study found that MRSA killed nearly 19,000 Americans in 2005, a total surpassing U.S. AIDS deaths that year. Most fatalities occurred among those with compromised immune systems in health care settings, such as hospitals. But a rarer form, Community Associated MRSA, or CA-MRSA, has increasingly infected healthy folks. The study suggests blacks may be twice as vulnerable to MRSA as whites. Insert blood-curdling scream here? Not quite. Some experts say staph's threat to healthy people has been exaggerated. And the Food and Drug Administration has cleared a new rapid blood test for MRSA, which will let physicians more confidently treat the infection. A survival guide:

Deep breath: MRSA isn't invincible.
True, it's resistant to a group of antibiotics that includes the commonly prescribed methicillin and penicillin. But it's rarely deadly outside the hospital—and can be treated with other drugs, says Nicole Coffin of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Certain infections can also be treated by draining the skin abscesses the virus often creates. "More often than not, [MRSA infections] are minor and heal uneventfully," says Stephanie Boyd of the Alliance for the Prudent Use of Antibiotics, a group dedicated to curbing antibiotic resistance. However, MRSA can progress into invasive boils, so see a doctor if you have sores that don't heal.

It's not an epidemic, either.
Though the number of reported MRSA infections has risen in recent years, rates are still relatively low. Only about one percent of people carry MRSA bacteria.

Then why is race a factor?
African Americans may be at higher risk because we tend to have higher rates of chronic illness, which can translate into weakened immune systems and frequent hospital trips, where it's possible to encounter MRSA. Also, low socioeconomic status may trump race; one study, which named being black a chief risk factor for MRSA, included many participants from public housing—which, researchers report, may disproportionately attract former inmates or drug abusers. Jails, like hospitals, can also be hot spots for MRSA. Intravenous-drug users may pass

along MRSA with HIV and hep C through shared needles.

So get with the program.
Your best bet is simply to practice good hygiene, avoid other people’s cuts and wash your hands often.

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