

## **Diseases in the drapes: Hospital privacy curtains are a breeding ground for MRSA and other dangerous bugs because they are 'always touched but rarely changed'**

- Canadian researchers measured levels of contamination on hospital curtains
- All curtains in patients' rooms stored hospital superbug MRSA on the surface
- And it took just days for the drapes to become contaminated with bacteria
- Experts say curtains should be changed often to avoid 'unnecessary suffering'

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Hospitals are full of bugs and diseases but there could be deadly bacteria lurking somewhere you least expect – the curtains. Nearly 90 per cent of privacy curtains could be harbouring MRSA or other infectious bacteria, research in one Canadian hospital has revealed. Curtains could be teeming with antibiotic resistant bacteria just days after being hung in patients' rooms – even if they don't have the infections themselves. Patients, health workers and visitors all often touch the curtains, allowing bacteria to spread, but they aren't changed often enough, researchers said. The scientists have now called for curtains to be regularly cleaned or replaced to avoid 'unnecessary suffering' caused by people getting sick from the drapes.



Bacterial swabs of privacy curtains at the Health Sciences Centre in Winnipeg found they all harboured the hospital superbug MRSA at some point over a 21-day period

Research by the University of Manitoba in Canada tracked the contamination of curtains at the Health Sciences Centre hospital in Winnipeg. They studied 10 curtains which had been newly washed at the beginning of the study and measured the bacteria on them over a three-week period. Four curtains were put in a four-bed room on the hospital's burns and plastics unit, four were put in two double rooms, and two more were kept away from patients and

After 14 days, seven of the eight curtains in patient rooms had all had MRSA on them at least once – a bacteria which commonly spreads in hospitals. All the curtains in patients' rooms had harboured MRSA by the end of the three-week study. MRSA can kill people with weakened immune systems and has become resistant to traditional antibiotics like penicillin. And none of the patients staying in the rooms even had the infection, suggesting the bacteria were being transported around the hospital by health workers and visitors.

Curtains in patient rooms were almost twice as contaminated by day three as the hidden curtains were after three weeks. Drapes kept away from people never harboured enough bacteria to be considered contaminated, so were still 'clean' after 21 days. The authors wrote in their study: 'Healthcare-associated infections contribute to unnecessary patient suffering and to increased healthcare costs. "We know that privacy curtains pose a high risk for cross-contamination because they are frequently touched but infrequently changed,' added Dr Kevin Shek, the study's lead author.

'The high rate of contamination that we saw by the fourteenth day may represent an opportune time to intervene, either by cleaning or replacing the curtains.' The scientists tracked contamination by swabbing curtains in the areas where they were most commonly touched by people. They measured bacteria by how many colony-forming units – bacteria or fungi which could rapidly multiply – per centimetre. Whereas swabs from the curtains kept away from people never rose above 0.74CFU/cm<sup>2</sup>, one of the patient curtains reached 11.32CFU/cm<sup>2</sup> – 15 times as much bacteria. Now, experts are urging hospitals to clean or replace their curtains regularly to stop the spread of hospital superbugs. 'Keeping the patient's environment clean is a critical component in preventing healthcare-associated infections,' said Dr Jane Haas, president of the Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology. 'Because privacy curtains could be a mode of disease transmission, maintaining a schedule of regular cleaning offers another potential way to protect patients from harm while they are in our care.'

The findings were published in the American Journal of Infection Control