

## Are You a Pathogen Parade? #3241

Are your scrubs clean? You may think so, but chances are you are transporting pathogens from patient to patient. In a hospital environment where your work includes entering multiple patient care areas, you bring along some uninvited guests and pick up a few more with each patient encounter. With all those hitchhikers, you could be a regular pathogen parade.



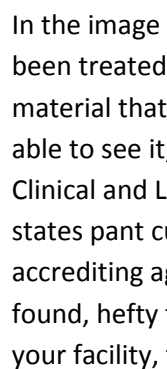
It's not just the bottoms of your shoes. The clothing you are wearing also harbors bacteria. Studies have shown that the environments of MRSA-infected patients are contaminated 73% of the time. That means every time you enter a patient care area and your scrubs or jacket touches a side rail, sink, blanket, bedside stand, or other patient care equipment, your clothes pick up additional pathogens. According to another study, pathogenic staphylococci and enterococci are able to survive on fabrics up to fifty-six days.

Consider where you go after work. Where do the bacteria on your scrubs go when you leave at the end of your shift?

- Into your car
- To your child's day care
- On your child's face when he gives you a big hug
- Into the grocery store
- On grandma when you help her put on her sweater
- Into your own home
- On your cat when she rubs against your pant legs



In the image above, a healthcare worker is entering the grocery store after her shift. Do you see any problem in the picture? There sure is. Her scrub pants are dragging on the ground. Every bacterium that has attached itself to the bottom of her pants is paraded everywhere she goes. The MRSA from the floor in Mrs. Smith's hospital room is now on the bottom of her scrubs. So is the *c-diff* and *e-coli* she picked up from the floor in Mr. McDonald's room. The *carbenapem resistant enterococci* (CRE) she picked up from the floor in Mr. Henry's room is also on her pant cuffs. All those pathogens are depositing themselves on every surface they come into contact with as she walks. It is all over the hospital, her car, her child's day care, the grocery store, and soon it will be in her home.



In the image to the left, students from the School of Phlebotomy walked over an area that had been treated with an invisible reflective material. Under a black light, the pant cuffs glow from the material that was picked up off the floor as they walked. If this were bacteria, you would not be able to see it, but it would be there with the potential to spread disease with every step. The Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute's (CLSI) document GP-17 "*Clinical Laboratory Safety*" states pant cuffs should be one to one-and-a-half inches above the floor. Regulatory and accrediting agencies watch for compliance with infection control standards. If infractions are found, hefty fines to your facility could be forthcoming. Aside from the financial repercussions to your facility, think about the consequences of infections to your patients and your own family.

Best practice is to change into clean clothes and shoes at the end of your shift and not wear your scrubs and work shoes outside of the healthcare environment. Leave shoes in a closed box or bag. Place your soiled clothes in a sealed bag and wash them with other work scrubs (not with family laundry) in hot water at least 160 degrees, or consider adding bleach.



## Test Your Knowledge

1. According to a study, how many days can staphylococci and enterococci survive on clothing?
  - a. 7
  - b. 21
  - c. 56
  - d. none of the above
2. The environments of MRSA-infected patients are also contaminated what percentage of the time?
  - a. 20%
  - b. 45%
  - c. 57%
  - d. 73%
3. According to CLSI's GP-17 document "*Clinical Laboratory Safety; Approved Guidelines*," pant cuffs must be how far from the surface of the floor?
  - a. 5 inches
  - b. 1 to 1 ½ inches
  - c. ½ inch
  - d. none of the above
4. Scrub pants that are allowed to touch the floor could be harboring what organisms?
  - a. MRSA
  - b. c-diff
  - c. e-coli
  - d. all of the above
5. What other areas could become contaminated when scrubs are worn outside the hospital after working a shift?
  - a. the healthcare worker's car
  - b. the healthcare worker's home
  - c. every place the healthcare worker goes while wearing the scrubs
  - d. all of the above
6. Who might be impacted when pathogens are spread via a healthcare worker's clothing?
  - a. the healthcare worker
  - b. the healthcare worker's family and pets
  - c. strangers in a grocery store
  - d. all of the above
7. What is the best practice for reducing the spread of pathogens from contaminated clothing?
  - a. Wear appropriate-length scrub pants and change into clean clothing and shoes before leaving the facility
  - b. Apply an antibacterial spray to the clothing before leaving the facility
  - c. Place soiled scrubs in a sealed bag with similar work clothes and wash in 160 degree hot water or add bleach
  - d. both a and c

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Dept \_\_\_\_\_