Department of Public Health
CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia Department of Public Health
Division of Disease Control

CHERYL BETTIGOLE, MD, MPH
Health Commissioner

SHARA EPSTEIN, MD
Medical Director, Division of Disease Control

COLEMAN TERRELL
Director, Division of Disease Control

Health Update

Update: Outbreak and Containment of *Candida auris* in PA Healthcare Facilities

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EPIDEMIOLOGY OF *C. AURIS* IN PENNSYLVANIA

The Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) and Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) are reminding healthcare facilities, providers, and laboratories to have heightened awareness for *C. auris* in patients and to take action to contain the spread.

In March 2020, the first confirmed case of *C. auris* was detected in Pennsylvania in a patient admitted to a Philadelphia short-term acute care hospital. Since then, cases of *C. auris* have continued to increase in southeastern PA and one case was detected in central PA. An epidemiologic summary through July 2021 is available in PA-HAN-584. In recent months, a second case of *C. auris* was detected in the central part of the state in a patient who was exposed to *C. auris* in a neighboring state; no demonstrated transmission occurred as a result of this case. Additionally, two clinical cases have been detected in western PA. One case patient was exposed to *C. auris* domestically, in the southwest United States, and another was presumably exposed during healthcare admissions in the Middle East. There has been limited transmission so far, with five associated colonized cases detected. Containment and response activities are ongoing.

In the southeast region, *C. auris* has been detected in over 50% of the ventilator-capable skilled nursing facilities (vSNFs) and long-term acute care hospitals (LTACHs) serving high-risk patients, and many of these facilities have experienced further transmission. While the majority of *C. auris* cases remain concentrated in southeastern PA, recently detected cases in central and western PA indicate that healthcare facilities across the state should be on alert for *C. auris*.

To date, **144 cases of *C. auris* infection and colonization have been identified in patients in 24 healthcare facilities** across Allegheny, Bucks, Dauphin, Delaware, Lehigh, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties.

This HAN provides recommendations for PA healthcare facilities, providers, and laboratories for prevention and planning purposes in areas where *C. auris* has not yet been identified, and containment of *C. auris* when cases are detected.

C. AURIS BACKGROUND

C. auris is an emerging fungus that presents a serious global health threat. **CDC, DOH and PDPH are concerned about *C. auris* for three reasons:**

- It is often multidrug-resistant, meaning that it is resistant to multiple antifungal drugs commonly used to treat *Candida* infections, resulting in significant morbidity and mortality in affected patients. Some strains are resistant to all three available classes of antifungals.
- It is difficult to identify with standard laboratory methods, and it can be misidentified in laboratories without specific technology. Misidentification may lead to inappropriate management.

- It has caused outbreaks in healthcare settings, particularly in vSNFs and LTACHs. For this reason, it is important to quickly identify *C. auris* so that healthcare facilities can take special precautions to stop its spread.

C. auris infection has been identified in many body sites including bloodstream, urine, respiratory tract, wounds, and external ear canal. Based on information from a limited number of patients, CDC reports that 30–60% of people with *C. auris* infections have died. Many of these people had other serious illnesses that also increased their risk of death.

A person's level of colonization may vary over time, leading to intermittent positive and negative results if testing is repeated. For this reason, there is no established criteria for resolution of colonization, and testing for clearance is not recommended. *C. auris* is also persistent in the environment and will survive many disinfectants routinely used in healthcare facilities.

Risk Factors
Persons who have recently spent time in hospitals and nursing homes, particularly vSNFs and LTACHs, and have invasive devices (e.g., mechanical ventilation or tracheostomy, feeding tubes and central venous catheters) seem to be at highest risk for *C. auris* infection. Like other types of *Candida* infections, risk factors include recent surgery, diabetes, and broad-spectrum antibiotic or antifungal use. Infections have been found in patients of all ages.

Although risk of transmission within a healthcare facility increases with length of stay, documented transmission has occurred during exposure periods as short as four hours.[1-2]

Routine travel to countries with documented *C. auris* infections is not likely to increase the chance of someone getting sick from *C. auris*. Persons who travel to these countries to seek medical care or who are hospitalized there for a long time may have an increased risk for *C. auris* infection or colonization; however, most new cases of *C. auris* in the U.S. are not linked to international exposure and are thought to be domestically acquired.

Drug resistance
Reports of echinocandin- or pan-resistant *C. auris* cases in the United States are increasing. Nationally, multiple outbreaks of highly resistant *C. auris* have involved people with overlapping healthcare exposures and *without previous exposure to antifungal treatment*, suggesting transmission of these strains is occurring.

Transmission
C. auris can spread in healthcare settings through contact with contaminated environmental surfaces or equipment or from person to person. Transmission is not thought to occur via persistent colonization of healthcare workers.

Diagnosis
A *C. auris* diagnosis can often be missed if the laboratory does not further speciate *Candida* detected in clinical specimens. *C. auris* can also be misidentified as several different organisms, particularly *Candida haemulonii*, when using traditional phenotypic methods for yeast identification. The CDC algorithm to identify *C. auris* based on phenotypic laboratory method and initial species identification is available here: https://www.cdc.gov/fungal/candida-auris/recommendations.html

For more information, please see the Recommendations for Laboratorians and Health Professionals.

Treatment
CDC does not recommend treatment of *C. auris* identified from noninvasive sites (such as respiratory tract, urine, and skin colonization) when there is no evidence of infection. Similar to recommendations for other *Candida* species, treatment is generally only indicated if clinical disease is present. Patients who become colonized with *C. auris* are at risk of developing invasive infections from this organism. More information about how to prevent colonization from developing into infection is available from the CDC.

INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL FOR *C. AURIS*

Infection control measures should be used for all patients with *C. auris*, whether infected or colonized, and regardless of the source of specimen. Transmission-based precautions should not be discontinued when treatment for an infection ends but should be continued for the duration of the patient's stay in a healthcare facility and implemented for any future healthcare stays.

The primary infection control measures for prevention of *C. auris* transmission in healthcare settings are:

- Adherence to hand hygiene. Alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) is effective against *C. auris* and is the preferred method for routine hand hygiene.
- Appropriate use of transmission-based precautions. Patients colonized or infected with *C. auris* in hospitals and nursing homes should be managed using contact precautions. For long-term nursing home residents, discuss options for implementing modified contact precautions or enhanced barrier precautions with your public health point of contact.
- Cleaning and disinfecting the patient care environment (thorough daily and terminal cleaning) and reusable equipment with an EPA-registered disinfectant with a claim against *C. auris* (List P) or a product with documented effectiveness against C. auris by CDC, is critical as *C. auris* can persist on surfaces in healthcare settings. If none of these products are available, an EPA-registered hospital-grade disinfectant effective against *Clostridioides difficile* spores (List K) can be used. Note that many products with label claims against COVID-19 are not effective against *C. auris*.
- Inter-facility communication about patient's *C. auris* status when a patient is transferred to another healthcare facility. A DOH transfer letter is available to print and send with a patient on transfer, for patients who are positive for *C. auris* and those with a pending colonization specimen. Patients with a pending colonization specimen should be placed on preemptive contact precautions upon transfer to the receiving facility. PDPH also has a transfer letter that should accompany a patient positive for *C. auris* upon transfer.
- Screening contacts of newly identified case patients to identify *C. auris* colonization.
- Laboratory surveillance of clinical specimens to detect additional cases.

Additional information can be obtained on the CDC Infection Prevention and Control for *Candida auris* page.

Colonization Screening
All healthcare facilities and providers in Pennsylvania should consider screening patients at high risk for *C. auris and placing them on preemptive contact precautions while awaiting test results.*

- Healthcare contacts of those with newly identified *C. auris* infection or colonization;
- Patients with the following risk factors for *C. auris*, especially those with more than one risk factor:

- Patients who are on a mechanical ventilator or have a tracheostomy and reside in or are transferred from an LTACH or a SNF with the capability to care for residents on ventilators;
- Patients who had an overnight stay in a healthcare facility outside the United States within the last year;
- Patients infected or colonized with carbapenemase-producing carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae (CP-CRE); co-colonization of *C. auris* with these organisms has been observed.

Healthcare facilities and providers should contact their local health department or DOH to discuss public health resources for *C. auris* screening. Limited public health laboratory resources are available to perform colonization screening using a validated method of detection for composite axillary/groin swabs. Facilities should also consider ways to increase capacity for *C. auris* screening including developing their own laboratory capacity or working with reference laboratories that offer this testing.

CONTAINMENT RESPONSE FOR *C. AURIS*

C. auris resources and toolkits are available through PA DOH (Healthcare Facility Toolkit for Response to *Candida auris*) and PDPH (Philadelphia Department of Public Health - *Candida Auris* Toolkit).

A single case of *C. auris* (infection or colonization) requires a robust containment response. Be aware that as part of the current response, local and state public health departments may be conducting outreach to healthcare facilities and clinical laboratories with cases, epidemiologic links to case patients, or with patients at high risk of *C. auris*.

Healthcare Facilities and Providers

For healthcare facilities and providers in all regions of PA, DOH and PDPH jointly request that facilities implement the following containment measures:

- Develop and maintain *C. auris* action plans to assure measures are in place should a patient with *C. auris* be detected in, or transferred to, the facility.
- Maintain vigilance for clinical illness that could be consistent with *C. auris*, particularly in patients at higher risk.
- Evaluate surveillance protocols with the laboratory to ensure prompt notification to the infection prevention and control program when *C. auris* is suspected.
- Deliver education to staff and providers about *C. auris* and the infection prevention and control measures necessary to contain it. Resources are available on CDC's *C. auris* infection prevention and control page.
    - Educational in-services must include an emphasis on hand hygiene. Alcohol-based hand sanitizer is effective against *C. auris* and is the preferred method for cleaning hands when they are not visibly soiled. If hands are visibly soiled, wash with soap and water.
- Facilities that have not previously had *C. auris* cases should contact their local public health jurisdiction prior to admitting a patient known or suspected to be colonized or infected with *C. auris*.
- Report to the local public health jurisdiction when a patient colonized or infected with *C. auris* will be transferred from your facility to another facility; this allows public health to work with the

receiving facility to provide education and ensure they are prepared to implement appropriate infection prevention and control measures.

- Review environmental cleaning practices for effectiveness against *C. auris*. Use of an EPA-registered hospital-grade disinfectant with a claim against *C. auris* (List P) or a product with documented effectiveness against C. auris by CDC, is critical as *C. auris* can persist on surfaces in healthcare settings. If none of these products are available, an EPA-registered hospital-grade disinfectant effective against *Clostridioides difficile* spores (List K) can be used. Note that many products with label claims against COVID-19 are not effective against *C. auris*.
- Increase audits for hand hygiene, personal protective equipment (PPE) and environmental cleaning on units where patients with *C. auris* are located. Consider re-educating healthcare personnel through an in-service or retraining, especially if audits demonstrate low adherence to recommended infection prevention and control practices.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 response, healthcare facilities should assess how contingency and crisis capacity standards for PPE impact the containment of multidrug-resistant organisms. For patients infected or colonized with organisms listed as urgent and serious threats on CDC's 2019 Antibiotic Resistance Threats report, we strongly recommended the use of conventional capacity standards for PPE.

Clinical Laboratories

Clinical laboratories should implement methods to detect *C. auris* as outlined below:

- Use the CDC *Candida auris* laboratory resource and algorithm to identify *C. auris* based on the available phenotypic laboratory method and initial species identification.
- If your laboratory does not have methodologies required to speciate *C. auris*, talk with your health department to evaluate the utility of forwarding isolates suspicious for *C. auris* for further testing at commercial or public health laboratories that can perform *C. auris* identification. Please do not forward isolates to the public health laboratories without health department approval.
- If possible, perform speciation for all yeast isolates from an inpatient in a healthcare facility (acute care hospital, LTACH, or SNF), including from both normally sterile and nonsterile body sites. This activity may be particularly useful in healthcare facilities that have already identified *C. auris* within their patient population.

Reporting

Healthcare facilities, providers, and laboratories **with suspected or confirmed cases of *C. auris* (infection or colonization), should report them to PDPH at 215-685-6748 or DOH by calling 1-877-PA-HEALTH, or your local health department.** *C. auris* became nationally notifiable in 2018.

References

1. Public Health England. Guidance for the laboratory investigation, management and infection prevention and control for cases of Candida auris - August 2017 v2.0. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/637685/Updated_Candida_auris_Guidance_v2.pdf

2. Schelenz S, Hagen F, Rhodes JL, Abdolrasouli A, Chowdhary A, Hall A, et al. First hospital outbreak of the globally emerging *Candida auris* in a European hospital. Antimicrob Resist Infect Control. 2016;5:35. Available from: https://aricjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13756-016-0132-5