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New method to fight superbug

The Northern Ireland ambulance service has begun piloting a new method of stopping the hospital superbug MRSA from spreading.

It is reckoned almost one in five stethoscopes could harbour the disease.

MRSA (methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus) is just one of the infections patients can develop in hospital, but it is the focus of public, government and the health service because of its resistance to treatment.

Paramedics have now been given a disposable film, developed in Northern Ireland, which fits over the head of the stethoscope.

Paramedic Eamonn Ferguson, who drives one of the Ambulance Services rapid responder vehicles now carries a silicon membrane which he puts over over his stethoscope before checking a patient.

"In taking blood pressure, we use the Stet-pro cover, which covers the diaphragm with the stethoscope, which prevents cross-contamination," he said.

"It is a pretty easy thing to use. Once we have used it, we discard it into a clinical waste bag."

It is thought almost three quarters of stethoscopes could be carrying some kind of infection.

John Wright of the NI Ambulance Service said: "We are very keen to join the hospital fight against the superbug, or MRSA - non-blood borne infections that we could be involved with helping to transmit."

Ambulance equipment is one obvious way germs can spread from one patient to another.

So John says in recent years, the Ambulance Service has moved increasingly towards only using disposable equipment.

The MRSA superbug plays a part in the deaths of at least



A silicon membrane is put over over the stethoscope

WATCH AND LISTEN
BBC NI's Dot K

"It is thought almost one in five stethoscopes could harbour the disease."

VIDEO

BBC iCAN**MRSA**
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30 people in Northern Ireland every year. Still more die from other infections.

Last month, the government announced it was introducing further measures, such as bringing in overseas experts and publication of infection rates, in a bid to reduce rates.



Paramedic Eamonn Ferguson uses the new method

The UK has one of the highest levels of hospital infections in Europe.

They are estimated to cost the NHS around £1 billion a year.

A National Audit Office report a fortnight ago warned that many doctors and nurses still fail to wash their hands between patients - even though this is thought to be the key factor in preventing the spread of infections between patients.

It said many staff still see the issue as a problem for infection control teams alone, and do not take responsibility for it themselves.

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