Hospitals and nursing homes in California and Illinois are testing a surprisingly simple strategy against the dangerous, antibiotic-resistant superbugs that kill thousands of people each year: washing patients with a special soap.

The effort is part of a roughly $8 million from the federal government’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — are taking place at 50 facilities in those two states. This novel approach recognizes that superbugs aren’t limited to one hospital or nursing home but move quickly through a community, said Dr. John Jernigan, an infectious-diseases specialist at Rush University Medical Center, who is heading the CDC-funded project in California.

“Superbugs are scary and they are ubiquitous,” said Dr. Matthew Zahn, medical director of epidemiology at the Orange County Health Care Agency. “They are everywhere and are transmitted through people’s hands.”

Some of the most common bacteria in health care facilities are methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA, and carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae, or CRE, often called “nightmare bacteria.” CRE and MRSA are two common germs that can fall into this category when they become resistant to last-resort antibiotics.

The CDC’s efforts are part of a network to help hospitals and nursing homes in Orange County, California, and Illinois to track antibiotic-resistant infections, according to a Kaiser Health News analysis, and the facilities with repeat citations for infection-control problems over a four-year period, according to a Kaiser Health News analysis.

The goal is to prevent new people from getting CRE bacteria at admission and bathing them daily with chlorhexidine.

In California, researchers are working with 14 nursing homes and long-term care hospitals, where staff are screening people for the CRE bacteria and bathing them daily with chlorhexidine.

At least 2 million people in the U.S. become infected with an antibiotic-resistant bacterium each year, and about 23,000 die from these infections, according to the CDC.

The Chicago project, which started in 2017 and ends in September, includes a campaign to promote handwashing and increased use of an antiseptic soap, which she and her colleagues call “decolonizing” — on every resident, patient or staff member coming through the door.

Jennifer Shinkles, a nurse at a shelter in Anaheim, Calif., said the CRE bacteria have “basically spread widely” through a community, and the staff are trying to control CRE from taking hold, said Dr. Matthew Zahn, medical director of epidemiology at the Orange County Health Care Agency. “We don’t have an infinite amount of time,” he said. “Taking a chance to make a difference in CRE’s trajectory now is really important.”

The CDC-funded project in California is based in Orange County, where 36 hospitals and nursing homes are using the antiseptic wash along with an iodine-based nose swab. The goal is to prevent new people from getting drug-resistant bacteria and keep the ones who already have the bacteria on their skin or elsewhere from developing antibiotic-resistant infections, said Huang, who is leading the project.

Huang kicked off the project by studying how patients move among different hospitals and nursing homes in Orange County, and found they do so far more than imagined.

Researchers reported that patients who had the MRSA bacteria who used chlorhexidine for bathing and as a mouthwash, and swabbed their noses with a nasal antibiotic, could reduce their risk of developing a MRSA infection by 30%. But all the patients in that study, published in February in the New England Journal of Medicine, already had been discharged from hospitals.

Jernigan said the plan is to use the project as a blueprint for what to do after patients leave hospitals or nursing homes and extend the work to CRE. The traditional hospitals participating in the new project are focusing on patients in intensive care units and those who had already carried drug-resistant bacteria, while the nursing homes and the long-term acute care hospitals perform the cleaning — also called “decolonizing” — on every resident.

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Coughing patients, assisted Cristinos Portugal, 69, in Portugal<br>Special wash using antiseptic soap, which she<br>Shinkles’ face at a shelter in Anaheim, Calif.,<br>in an infinite amount of time,” he said. “Taking a chance to make a difference in CRE’s trajectory now is really important.”

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