

MRSA Awareness in Schools

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Q&A about Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus

What is MRSA?

- MRSA is the acronym for *Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus*, an antibiotic-resistant strain of the common *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria (staph).
- Staph is one of the most common causes of skin infections in the United States.
- The common staph bacteria itself is not always dangerous, but the antibiotic-resistant MRSA strain is hard to treat with commonly-used antibiotic medications.
- Because of its antibiotic resistance, MRSA sometimes can lead to life-threatening infections.

How common are MRSA infections?

- Healthy people carry staph on their skin or in their noses. The majority of staph infections are minor; however, staph can cause more serious infections that require special antibiotic treatment.
- MRSA is almost always spread by direct, physical contact – such as openings in the skin (cuts or abrasions), crowded living conditions, and poor hygiene.
- Previously, MRSA infections were found almost exclusively in hospitals and nursing homes, but now they are becoming a rapidly growing problem in our communities, earning the name CA-MRSA – or Community-Acquired MRSA – because of how the bacteria spreads in public or community areas.

Who is at risk?

- Anyone who is in physical contact with other people on a regular basis is at an increased risk of acquiring MRSA and other potentially dangerous bacterial infections.
- It is estimated that 30-50% of the population carries CA-MRSA bacteria on their bodies.

Why are athletes so susceptible to MRSA infections?

- Athletes have to be particularly concerned about MRSA because it is easily spread from person-to-person due to close, physical contact in athletics.
- In addition, athletic facilities provide the ideal environment for bacteria to thrive, as they can be warm and humid.
- MRSA can be spread through touching objects such as towels, clothing, workout areas and sports equipment that have MRSA germs on them. MRSA can live on the skin and survive on objects and surfaces for more than 24 hours.
- Athletes are also thought to be more susceptible to staph infections because their immune system temporarily lowers after a hard workout.

What does MRSA infection look like?

- MRSA can present itself in various forms of skin infections ranging from boils, blisters, rashes, pimples, or ingrown hairs. These often occur in the armpits, groin, neck, and buttocks.
- MRSA infection sometimes has the appearance of a spider bite, which can lead to misdiagnoses.
- Symptoms of MRSA infection may include redness, warmth at the site, swelling, pus, and pain. Unexplained fever, muscular pain and/or fatigue after a skin infection are symptoms that could be related to an MRSA infection.
- MRSA-infected skin lesions (sores) can change from skin or surface irritations to abscesses or serious skin infections.
- If left untreated, MRSA can infect the blood, bones, and other organs.

What is the treatment for an MRSA infection?

- Once a staph infection is suspected, a doctor can take a sample/culture of the infection and send it to a lab for testing.
- If the staph germs being tested can not be treated or killed with standard antibiotics, then the infection is diagnosed as MRSA.
- Many MRSA infections can be treated by draining the abscess or boil and may not require antibiotics.
- To prevent serious complications, only healthcare providers/doctors should drain an abscess or boil.
- Most MRSA infections are treatable with antibiotics. However, in severe cases, a very strong antibiotic must be administered in a hospital.
- All wounds should be covered with a clean, dry bandage until healed. This will greatly reduce the risks of spreading the infection.
- If a staph or MRSA infection is diagnosed, follow your health care provider's instructions and notify the school.

How can MRSA infection be prevented?

- According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), good personal hygiene will help prevent skin infections. This includes:
 - Showering and washing with soap and water immediately after practice, competition and training.
 - Not sharing personal care items such as bars of soap, towels and razors, uniforms, and sports equipment that directly touch the body.
 - Taking home practice clothes, towels, and other linens on a daily basis and returning clean practice clothes back to school.
 - Washing practice clothes, uniforms and other sports-related linens in hot water and laundry detergent. Using a hot dryer, rather than air drying, also helps kill bacteria.
 - Wiping down athletic equipment and materials with sanitizer regularly.
 - Notifying coaches, athletic trainers and the school's clinic staff of any wounds that are potentially infected.
 - Keeping all wounds clean and covered and avoiding contact with others' open wounds, or anything that could possibly be contaminated by infection (boils, blisters, etc).
 - Washing hands frequently with soap and water, especially after practice, competition and training.

What are Fulton County schools doing about this problem?

- The above procedures are enforced in the Fulton County Schools middle and high school athletic programs.
- Information is being shared with students and parents, with an emphasis on high school student athletes and their families.
- Parents/guardians are encouraged to be on alert for any signs and symptoms of skin infections in their children.
- Students and staff are being encouraged to wash hands frequently.
- Fulton County schools will follow the CDC's and the Fulton County Department of Health and Wellness recommendations to close schools for any communicable disease and in making the decision to inform the entire school community about a single case of MRSA infection.
- Fulton County's Environmental Services use cleaning supplies that are Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) registered disinfectants to clean the school environment. These cleaning agents are used routinely to disinfect our school environment and have proven to be effective against staph infections and MRSA.
- If MRSA is suspected, please contact your healthcare provider and contact the school.

If you have any additional questions, please contact your school clinic or the Fulton County Schools' Office of Student Health Services at 404-305-2177.

More information also can be found on the Centers for Disease Control web site at www.cdc.gov/features/MRSAinSchools.