



Media Release

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Health Department Issues Guidance on MRSA in Arkansas

(LITTLE ROCK--) In response to calls from concerned parents and local school officials, the Arkansas Department of Health (ADH) is issuing some guidance on dealing with community-acquired staph infections here in Arkansas. According to James Phillips, MD, Director of the Infectious Disease Branch at ADH, the problem is not really a new one. "Community acquired methicillin-resistant staphylococcus (CA-MRSA) has been a known problem since the 1990's. It's just increasing in frequency and awareness. It's the number one bacterial infection of the skin," Phillips says.

Staph bacteria, including MRSA, can cause skin infections that may look like a pimple or boil and can be red, swollen, painful, or have pus or other drainage. More serious infections may cause pneumonia, bloodstream infections, or surgical wound infections.

Some twenty to thirty percent of the population carry Staphylococcus aureus (staph), bacteria on the skin or in the nose. Some staph are resistant to methicillin and related antibiotics and, thus, are called methicillin-resistant Staph aureus (MRSA). MRSA infections were first seen in hospital and healthcare settings. They are spread through direct physical contact or indirect contact with contaminated towels, sheets, wound dressings, etc. However, in the last five to ten years, Arkansas and other states are seeing cases in patients that haven't been in a hospital or healthcare facility. CA-MRSA, while sharing methicillin resistance, is different from hospital-acquired MRSA.

Now that MRSA has captured national headlines following the death of a student in Virginia, many parents and school officials are worried about what is being done.

Prevention is key. If you have a staph infection, or think you might be infected, here are some steps you can take to decrease the risk of exposure to your family and others around you:

- Contact your healthcare provider.
- Cover all wounds with clean bandages, particularly those that produce drainage or pus. Follow your healthcare provider's instructions on proper care of the wound. Pus from infected wounds can contain staph, so keeping the infection covered will help prevent the spread to others. Bandages or tape can be discarded with the regular trash.

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- Wash your hands often, take frequent showers, and practice good hygiene. You, your family, and others in close contact should wash their hands frequently with soap and warm water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, especially after changing the bandage or touching the infected wound.
- Don't share towels or personal items, such as razors, combs, clothing or sports equipment that directly touches the body. Wash sheets, towels, and clothes with hot water (at least 160°F if possible), laundry detergent and chlorine bleach.
- Drying clothes in a hot dryer, rather than air-drying, also helps kill bacteria in clothes.
- Routinely clean any exercise equipment used by others.

If these precautions are taken, there is no reason to keep students or employees at home. Small children with draining wounds may need to be excluded from daycare until their wounds heal, unless good wound care and hand-washing can be assured.

Coaches can help prevent staph infections among athletes by taking the following steps:

- Promote good hygiene, including showering and washing with soap after all practices and competitions. Make sure enough soap and hot water are available.
- Discourage sharing of towels, uniforms or other personal items.
- Establish routine cleaning schedules for all shared exercise equipment. Encourage athletes to use a clean cloth or towel between their skin and any shared sports equipment.
- Assess athletes regularly for skin infections and encourage athletes to report sores or skin wounds to the coaching staff.
- If an athlete has an infected wound that cannot be adequately covered, then the athlete may need to be temporarily excluded from contact sports until the wound stops draining.

At least 95 percent of community-acquired MRSA (CA-MRSA) infections appear on the skin or in the soft tissues. Most of these infections start out looking like a pimple or spider bite and may develop into boils or cellulitis (soft tissue infection). Many infections can be managed using only topical procedures and with antibiotics given by mouth.

Persons most at risk for CA-MRSA include prison inmates, participants in competitive sports (especially contact sports like wrestling and football), and close contacts of patients with MRSA infections. However, anyone can become infected if they come into direct physical contact with the bacteria. If you think you have a staph infection, see your doctor for evaluation and care.

For more information, click on <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/MRSA/> or visit our website at: <http://www.healthyarkansas.com/mrsa/information.html>.

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