

Extra Feature Story

Schools Clean Up to Fight Deadly "Superbug"

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In recent weeks, several high schools in the northeastern United States have reported outbreaks of methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA, a bacteria known as a "superbug" because of its resistance to antibiotics.

Schools in New York, Connecticut and New Hampshire sent letters home with students warning about the risk after a Virginia high school student died from an MRSA infection.

The MRSA bacteria spreads on contaminated surfaces such as exercise equipment, school showers and locker rooms.

If it gets into skin through a cut, it causes red, swollen and painful blisters that ooze pus or other fluid drainage.

Almost all skin infection cases can be treated by draining the infection, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But the drug-resistant bacteria is harder to treat if it gets inside the body, spreading to the blood and internal organs.

Dangerous infection

While 25 to 30 percent of Americans have the Staphylococcus aureus (staph) bacteria on their body, only 1 percent has the MRSA variety.

Researchers say the drug-resistant form of the bacteria is the result of doctors over-prescribing antibiotic medications for common colds and ear infections.

Too many antibiotics in the environment favor bacteria that mutate and become resistant to common antibiotic treatments.

The CDC reported recently that more Americans die from MRSA infections than the AIDS virus. MRSA caused 94,000 life-threatening infections and 18,650 deaths in 2005, WebMD reported, while approximately 16,000 people died of AIDS in that year.

However, health officials stress that most of the deaths occur in nursing homes and hospitals and that it is rare for a healthy person to develop life-threatening blood or organ MRSA infections.

Symptoms of an invasive and potentially serious infection can include fever, chills and shortness of breath. The infection, confirmed through a skin or blood culture, requires treatment with several extra-strength antibiotics.

Spreading to schools

The fact that the bacteria is showing up in school settings, especially amongst sports teams due to their close physical contact, concerns school and athletic officials.

Students, teachers and coaches in areas with reported incidents are taking precautions to clean exercise equipment, locker rooms and other school facilities.

Fear of the bacteria has produced extreme reactions in some communities.

After NBC's "Today Show" filmed a report about the infection outbreaks in front of Walt Whitman High School near Washington, D.C., the principal had to send worried parents an e-mail explaining that the show used the school "as a backdrop to tell the national story, NOT because we have more staph infections!"

And an age-old sports ritual is in jeopardy: Whitman and Clarksburg High School field hockey players, fearing contamination, refused to shake hands after the game, The Washington Post reported. Their coaches later ordered the girls to shake hands.

Protecting students

While parents, students and school officials take extra steps to prevent more MRSA outbreaks, the CDC guidelines about the bacteria offer calming perspective.

The primary ways in which the bacteria spread are called the 5 C's: crowding, frequent skin-to-skin contact, compromised skin (cuts or abrasions), contaminated items and lack of cleanliness.

People can protect against the bacteria by washing their hands and showering after exercising, covering any wounds, not sharing personal items like towels and cleaning surfaces that people touch often.

CDC guidelines say that a student who has an MRSA infection can even go to school, provided that the student's wound can be safely covered, they maintain good personal hygiene and that they do not participate in sports that involve skin-to-skin contact.

-- Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra

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