

During the past couple of years there has been rising concern among health professionals about MRSA, Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus, and the increase in cases among high school athletes across the country.

MRSA is a staph infection that does not respond to traditional antibiotics, such as penicillin. That makes MRSA more dangerous than your normal staph infection, more difficult to treat, and has given it the status of being a superbug.

School outbreaks of MRSA have caused everything from district-wide school closures to severe illness, hospitalizations and even death among high school students. It is spread from person to person through direct skin contact or contact with shared items or surfaces that have touched a person's infection.

This puts athletes of contact sports, particularly wrestling and football, at an increased risk of transmission. It also means that locker rooms, where personal items are sometimes shared among athletes and the moist, humid environment is ideal for bacteria, are a prime breeding place for staph infections to spread.

Inadequate hygiene has been named as the culprit in previous outbreaks among team members. This can be everything from not showering after every game or practice, not removing sweat-soaked clothing after practices, not washing gym bags, not washing hands, sharing towels or other personal items and equipment, not cleaning equipment between uses, etc.

The spread of MRSA can be prevented, it just takes a little effort on the part of the athletes and coaches.

Practice good

personal hygiene

—Keep your hands clean by washing frequently with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand rub.

—Shower immediately after exercise. Do not share bar soap and towels.

—Wash your uniform and clothing after each use. Follow the clothing label's instructions for washing and drying. Drying clothes completely in a dryer is preferred. Take care of your skin.

—Wear protective clothing or gear designed to prevent skin abrasions or cuts.

—Cover skin abrasions and cuts with clean dry bandages or other dressings recommended by your team's healthcare provider (e.g., athletic trainer, team doctor) until healed.

Do not share items that come into contact with your skin

—Avoid sharing personal items such as towels and razors that contact your bare skin.

—Do not share ointments that are applied by placing your hands into an open-container.

—Use a barrier (such as clothing or a towel) between your skin and shared equipment like weight-training, sauna and steam-room benches.

Most MRSA infections are minor skin infections that first appear as a sore or boil that may look red, swollen, painful, or have pus or other drainage. It might start at the site of a break in the skin such as a cut or abrasion, and areas of the body covered by hair. Almost all MRSA skin infections can be treated by a family physician by draining the pus and with or without the use of antibiotics.

The threat of transmission becomes a serious concern when these skin infections are ignored or overlooked by athletes or coaches. If you think you or someone on your team or in your school has a skin infection, speak up. One player that has to sit the bench for a game or two is much better than a team that is sidelined with serious illness.