



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Public health addresses recent MRSA concerns

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Alabamians are becoming increasingly concerned about contracting Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA. The Alabama Department of Public Health advises all members of the public to practice good personal hygiene as the best preventive measure.

“Staph is among us, but it is not a reason to prevent children from attending day care centers, students from attending class, or athletes from participating in contact sports,” said Dr. Donald Williamson, state health officer. “Handwashing with soap and hot water or alcohol-based hand sanitizers, and covering wounds are the best ways to prevent its spread.”

MRSA bacteria are everywhere and can be found on about 30 percent of individuals’ skin and in their noses without causing disease. But because of a break in the skin, bacteria get into the body and cause infection. These infections can be treated with antibiotics. When common antibiotics do not kill the staph bacteria, they become resistant to those antibiotics.

MRSA is not new—it has been identified since the 1960s, and there are other antibiotics that can kill it. Anyone can get MRSA, but certain persons can get MRSA infections more easily than the general population. These include individuals with weakened immune systems, with cancer or who are receiving long-term steroid therapy, transplant recipients and people with multiple health problems.

Situations that can increase the risk of developing MRSA include living in crowded conditions such as in jails and prisons, dormitories, military barracks, nursing homes and being frequently admitted to a hospital.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention case studies indicate that 85 percent of severe cases of MRSA are associated with health care settings and are most common among individuals age 65 and older. The Alabama Department of Public Health advises that steps can be taken to help prevent infections from Community Associated Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, known as CA-MRSA. Although the department does not have statewide data about the occurrence of MRSA infections it is aware that this is a common problem.

Occasionally, staph can enter the body and cause an infection. This infection can be minor, such as boils, or serious, such as blood infections and pneumonia. Infections can look like a spider bite, a large, red painful bump under the skin (boil), a cut that is swollen, hot and filled with pus, or blisters filled with fluid. Almost all skin infections can be treated by draining the area. The spread of community-acquired MRSA can be prevented by keeping the wound clean and changing bandages frequently.

MRSA occasionally can cause severe and life-threatening infections. This is because the organism has acquired resistance to common antibiotics, and so it can be very difficult to treat and cure. Factors that have been associated with the spread of MRSA skin infections include: close skin-to-skin contact, openings in the skin such as cuts or abrasions, contaminated items and surfaces, crowded living conditions and poor hygiene.

Symptoms of a more serious staph infection may include rash, shortness of breath, fever, chills, chest pain, fatigue, muscle aches, a general feeling of illness, or headache. Serious staph infections may include cellulitis, endocarditis, toxic shock syndrome, pneumonia or blood poisoning.

“We don’t know what is causing the increase of MRSA cases,” said Fred Grady, director of the health department’s Epidemiology Division. “Overuse of antibiotics and use of more powerful drugs than necessary for less serious infections can be causing the emergence of more drug-resistant strains of the organism. These resistant bacteria survive and multiply, leading to antibiotic resistance.”

These guidelines can help prevent the spread of MRSA in **school** settings:

- * Avoid sharing personal items and skin care products such as clothing, balms and moisturizers.
- * Keep hands clean by washing thoroughly with soap and water for 15 seconds or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- * Keep cuts and scrapes clean and covered with a bandage until healed. Do not pick scabs.
- * Avoid contact with other people’s wounds or bandages.
- * Wash hands immediately after changing a bandage.
- * Seek medical attention if a wound does not heal properly or appears to be infected.
- * Encourage students and teachers to report known or suspected MRSA infections to the school nurse.

These guidelines can help prevent the spread of MRSA in **sports** settings:

- * Cover all wounds, change bandages frequently, and assure containment of any drainage. If the wound cannot be covered or there is uncontrolled drainage from the wound, athletes should not be permitted to participate in any contact sport at practice or competition.
- * Encourage good hygiene among athletes, including showering using soap after all practices and competitions.
- * Encourage frequent washing of practice and game uniforms, including equipment bags. Be sure to dry these on the hottest possible cycle to kill the bacteria.
- * **Do not** share towels or personal items such as clothing and equipment.
- * Clean shared equipment, including mats, with a bleach to water solution of one tablespoon to one quart of water freshened daily.
- * Train athletes, coaches, and trainers in first aid for wounds and to recognize wounds that may be infected.
- * Assess athletes regularly for skin infections.

See your health care provider for wound treatment and care. Information about MRSA is available at www.adph.org/epi.

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