



COUNTY OF DARE

Department of Public Health

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TO: Parents and School Staff

FROM: Anne B. Thomas, Health Director *Anne Thomas*

SUBJECT: Prevention of Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA)

There has been quite a bit of media focus on MRSA in schools recently. The Dare County Department of Public Health wants parents and school staff to be knowledgeable of what MRSA is and how to prevent it.

MRSA is short for Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*. *Staphylococcus aureus*, or staph, is a common bacteria – so common that 25 to 30 percent of us have it living on our skin at any one time. MRSA is a less common variety of staph that isn't affected by common antibiotics, such as penicillin. MRSA usually infects people who are in hospitals or long-term care settings, but over the past 10 years it has become more of a problem outside of health care settings.

MRSA skin infections begin as a small bump that may look like a pimple or a bug or spider bite. But, that little spot soon turns red, swells, gets hot, is painful to touch and fills with pus. Anyone with those symptoms should see a health care provider immediately.

If MRSA is diagnosed, then it is important that the wound stay completely covered until it is healed. This will prevent contact with draining pus, which could infect others. Antibiotics should be taken as prescribed. Students with MRSA can come to school with no problems as long as their wounds are covered. You can't catch the disease from being around them. People usually get infected by coming in direct contact with the person's wound or pus that drains from the wound.

Casual classroom contact won't spread MRSA which is the reason why school closure is not a recommended control measure. Infection is not spread from floors or walls or from classroom items like desks, pencils, or water fountains, so cleaning a classroom isn't the answer to reducing spread of MRSA.

But, cleaning your hands is. The most important thing you can do to reduce the spread of MRSA and a lot of other infections like the flu and the common cold is to wash your hands thoroughly and often. Wash your hands with soapy water for a minimum of 15 seconds. If soap or water isn't available, you can use alcohol-based hand sanitizers.

It is always good practice to wash your hands after using equipment that others may have just used, like weights. If you come in contact with another person's open wound, infected skin or soiled bandages, you should also wash your hands right away. And, don't share personal items like towels or razors.

In North Carolina and the rest of the country, most outbreaks of MRSA in schools have involved athletes. That's because athletes are more likely to have broken skin, which gives the bacteria an easy way into the body. They are also likely to share personal items like towels in locker room situations or come in direct contact with other athletes who may have open or draining wounds on the playing field.

That's why it is particularly important that athletes and their coaches be on the lookout for MRSA symptoms and practice good hygiene when it comes to washing their hands and covering open wounds.

No one with open wounds or draining skin lesions should ever use whirlpools, ice tubs, saunas or hot tubs. Shower as quickly as possible after exercising, and always shower with soap before and after using whirlpools, ice tubs, saunas or hot tubs.

Although general environmental cleaning in the school won't reduce the spread of MRSA, there are some other things that you can do in locker rooms or gyms to reduce MRSA:

- Places that come in contact with bare skin, like mats or weight benches, should first be cleaned with soap and water and then disinfected with a disinfecting product after each use.
- Always allow for contact time or air drying per manufacturer's instructions after using a disinfecting product on items.
- Weight equipment that comes in contact with skin should be cleaned daily, and everyone should wash their hands after using weight equipment.
- Use a clean towel as a barrier between bare skin and surfaces like weight benches.
- Get rid of equipment that is too damaged to clean.
- Wash towels and athletic clothes in hot water with ordinary detergent and dry on the hottest setting recommended for the fabric.

For more information, contact the Dare County Department of Public Health at (252) 475-5095 or your school nurse. Information is also available at http://www.epi.state.nc.us/epi/gcdc/ca_mrsa/ca_mrsa.html.