

•Why is MRSA a problem for school healthcare professionals?

There are several reasons why school health professionals are concerned about MRSA.

- MRSA infections are being more commonly recognized in community settings, including schools.
- Staph (including MRSA) are spread by direct contact, especially when personal hygiene is poor. In school settings, there are many opportunities for direct contact among students, especially those on athletic teams or in residential facilities.
- A MRSA outbreak can cause anxiety for parents, students and staff and MRSA infection can vary widely in severity.
- Identifying a MRSA infection can be difficult because the symptoms of MRSA infection are similar to those of other skin infections. MRSA can only be diagnosed by culture and laboratory testing. The laboratory will also perform antibiotic susceptibility testing. Unfortunately, misdiagnosis or delayed diagnosis of MRSA infection can result in delayed treatment and delayed institution of preventive measures.
- Finally, MRSA is part of a larger problem of antibiotic resistance. In the long term, Staphylococcus aureus may become resistant to many more antibiotics. For this reason it is important that healthcare providers diagnose MRSA early and accurately, prescribe appropriate antibiotics if needed, and direct patients to complete the full course of antibiotics as prescribed. At the same time, healthcare providers should be cautious about the unnecessary use of antibiotics, which can contribute to the problem of antibiotic resistance

•What should I do if a student in my school is reported to have MRSA?

Consider taking the following steps:

- Confirm the diagnosis. This may require contacting the doctor and family of the student to ensure that accurate medical information is available.
- Consult with your school physician to help assess the situation and institute a plan of action.
- Re-enforce proper hand washing practices, including appropriate supply of hand soap and access to handwashing facilities.
- Follow routine infection control precautions. Use the normal infection control precautions with a student who has MRSA infection:
 - Wear gloves when handling the student, or touching blood, body fluids, secretions, excretions, and any items contaminated with these fluids. Gloves should be used before touching mucous membranes and non-intact skin. Gloves should be removed after use, and handwashing performed before touching non-contaminated items and environmental surfaces and before tending to another student.
 - Linens (e.g., from cots), and/or towels from the locker rooms, that may contain blood, secretions, or excretions should be handled in a manner to prevent skin, mucous membrane and clothing exposure.
- Follow routine procedures for cleaning the school environment. In general, use routine procedures with a freshly prepared solution of commercially available cleaner such as detergent, disinfectant-detergent or chemical germicide, as per the manufacturer's directions.
- School attendance. Students and staff with a suspected or confirmed MRSA infection can attend school regularly as long as the wound is covered and they are receiving proper treatment. Students and staff do not need to be isolated or sent home in the middle of the day if a suspected staph or MRSA infection is noticed. Wash the area with soap and water and cover it lightly. Those who touch the wound should wash their hands immediately. The student should be encouraged to have the wound looked at by their healthcare provider as soon as possible to confirm a MRSA infection and determine the best course of treatment. The wound should be kept lightly covered until it has dried completely.

• What should I do if more than one student in my school is reported to have MRSA?

Follow the guidelines above. In addition, please contact the Pennsylvania Department of Health at 1-877-PA-HEALTH if you suspect more than one case of MRSA at your school.

• Do I need to alert parents and staff if a student has a MRSA infection?

Typically, it is not necessary to inform the entire school community about a MRSA infection. When MRSA occurs within the school population, the school nurse and the school physician should determine, based on their clinical

assessment, whether parents and staff should be notified. Prior to parent notification, discuss the issue with the school administration. The PADOH is available for consultation at 1-877-PA-HEALTH.

• **Are there special considerations for students with immune suppression or HIV?**

Students with weakened immune systems may be at risk for more severe illness if they get infected with MRSA. These students should follow the same prevention measures as all others to prevent staph infections, including practicing good hygiene, covering wounds (e.g., cuts or abrasions) with clean dry bandages, avoiding sharing personal items such as towels and razors, and contacting their doctor if they think they have an infection.

• **How can staph/MRSA infections be prevented at school?**

It is important for school healthcare professionals to coordinate infection control efforts with the athletics department, residential services, and other colleagues at the school to effectively prevent and control infections such as MRSA. To prevent MRSA infections at the school, consider these guidelines:

- Encourage and practice hand hygiene. Regular handwashing is the best way to prevent getting and spreading staph/MRSA.
- Practice and encourage good skin care. Since staph infections begin when staph enters the body through a break in the skin, keeping skin healthy and intact is an important preventative measure.
- Ensure access to sinks, soaps, and clean towels.
- Ensure the availability of alcohol-based hand sanitizers, if soap and water are not accessible.
- Educate school personnel (i.e., coaches, athletic trainers, etc.) about the importance of personal hygiene for students.
- Encourage daily showers with soap and water.
- Discourage sharing of personal items such as towels, razors, and toothbrushes.
- Regularly clean sinks, showers, and toilets by saturating with disinfectant.
- Disinfect athletic equipment between users.
- Launder sheets, towels, sports uniforms, and underclothing with hot water and detergent, and dry on the hottest setting.
- Wear gloves when handling dirty laundry.
- Wear gloves when caring for another person's wounds, and protect clothing from touching wounds or bandages.
- Encourage those infected to always keep draining lesions covered with dressings.
- Dispose of dressings containing pus and blood carefully.
- Disinfect contaminated portable equipment such as stethoscopes, blood-pressure cuffs, equipment handles, tourniquets, pagers, and cell phones.

• **What information on MRSA is available for students and parents / guardians?**

For more information about MRSA, visit:

- Pennsylvania Department of Health www.health.state.pa.us
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CA-MRSA Information for Providers http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/ar_mrsa_ca.html

Categories of Health Alert messages:

Health Alert: conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

Health Advisory: provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

Health Update: provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.

This information is current as of 11/1/2007, but may be modified in the future. We will continue to post updated information regarding the most common questions about this subject.