

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### **School Athletics on the Front Line in MRSA Prevention**

**Sports programs offer lessons for all students in better hygiene habits.**

By **Katie Ash**

Bacterial infections among students linked to the strain of staph known as MRSA have been thrust into the national spotlight in recent weeks, but the dangers of such infections—and the role of good hygiene in curbing them—are not news to athletic-department officials.

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"[This is] something that's been around for a while, and there's been information in the literature about it for a long time," said Susan F. Wooley, the executive director of the American School Health Association, based in Kent, Ohio, referring to MRSA. "There have certainly been instances of it in schools in athletics for probably at least 10 years."

Athletic programs are particularly at risk for spreading such infections because of the large numbers of students in locker rooms, the use of shared equipment, and skin-to-skin contact during sports activities. As a result, athletics officials are often expected to take the lead in isolating, preventing, and treating infections at school.

While MRSA is not new to athletic trainers and coaches, said Ms. Wooley, "it's new in that it seems to be occurring more, and it may be a more virulent strain." A federal study published last month drew attention to methicillin-resistant as a "major health-care problem."

Chuck Schmidt, the assistant executive director and chief operating officer of the Arizona Interscholastic Association, also said sports officials have been out in front.

"There is a heightened awareness [of infections] because of the media attention, but the certified athletic trainers have been on this for a while," he said.

#### **Familiar Precautions**

In the past 20 years, school athletic and health officials have put stricter rules in place in response to concerns about HIV, hepatitis, and other sources of infection, including MRSA.

"[The MRSA situation] is just like when HIV became part of the protocol, with blood on the uniforms," Mr. Schmidt said. "We always create a protocol any time anything comes up, to

minimize risk to kids.”

Based on athletic departments’ experiences with MRSA over the past decade, officials recommend that student-athletes take showers after practices and games, wash gym clothes after each use, disinfect shared equipment and gym bags every day, and engage in frequent handwashing to prevent the spread of bacteria. Experts say those are hygiene habits that all students should follow.

Guidelines for proper hygiene—the most effective way to prevent the spread of MRSA, as well as many other infections—are stipulated at the front of every rulebook in every sport for high school students, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations, the Indianapolis-based umbrella organization for high school sports and other student activities in the United States.

But the guidelines aren’t the problem—it’s properly enforcing them that can be difficult, said James L. Thornton, the head athletic trainer and director of sports at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, and a board member of the Dallas-based National Athletic Trainers’ Association.

Only a little over 40 percent of high schools have an athletic trainer available for student-athletes, according to the trainers’ association. But even that number may be misleading, according to Mr. Thornton.

“That includes students who have access to an athletic trainer for games ... but don’t have one during the day-to-day stuff that goes on in the athletic department,” he said, referring to physical education classes and athletic practices.

Without a full-time athletic trainer in every high school, schools run the risk of not being able to properly identify student-athletes with potentially harmful infections, Mr. Thornton contends.

Most schools, especially smaller ones, do not have the money to hire a full-time athletic trainer.

In an MRSA-related development in higher education, a former football player at Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y., who nearly lost his leg because of an infection, claimed in a lawsuit last week that the college’s athletic department had failed to maintain healthy conditions and practices in locker rooms.

College officials declined to comment on the lawsuit, but defended Iona’s efforts to maintain healthy environments for athletes.

*The Associated Press contributed to this story.*