

COUNTY OF SUFFOLK



STEVE LEVY
SUFFOLK COUNTY EXECUTIVE

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

HUMAYUN J. CHAUDHRY, D.O., M.S.
Commissioner

October 31, 2007

Dear Parent

Due to several recent cases around the country and locally of community-acquired skin infections and deaths associated with the bacteria, MRSA (Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*), the Suffolk County Department of Health Services is undertaking a public health education campaign to educate the public about this bacteria and how to prevent, manage and seek treatment for infections caused by it.

This afternoon, I joined County Executive Steve Levy and experts and officials from my department in convening a health education summit for Suffolk County's school superintendents and other representatives of school districts and schools across the county so that teachers, educators, and principals at your child's school are aware of this bacteria and have policies and practices in place that will address the public health needs of the entire student body population.

While medical studies show that MRSA is a greater concern among persons 65 years and older, particularly those whose immune system is compromised, it is an infection that can occur, and spread from person-to-person contact, in very rare circumstances among children who attend school and daycare settings and those who are engaged in contact sports or even in casual contact with one another. The infection is a concern, in fact, in any setting where people are in close contact with one another, such as in the military, professional sports teams, correctional facilities, etc. We will be reaching out to senior citizens and other high risk groups shortly.

As a parent of two boys myself, I understand the concerns parents must have about their children in our school system. What I would like to do in this letter is outline for you some very basic information about MRSA, to report some basic facts about the bacteria, and to help dispel some myths that are out there about how you get it and how you stop it.

First and foremost, **MRSA is entirely preventable**. How do you prevent this infection in your child or yourself? Wash hands frequently with soap and water (before eating and after every visit to the bathroom); avoid the sharing of towels, razors, uniforms and athletic equipment; remember to shower or bathe with soap and water after you exercise, work out in the gym, or engage in sports activity of any kind involving person-to-person contact; cover up any open cuts or wounds; and seek the advice of a health care provider if you or your child develops a skin infection or a boil on the skin. The first signs of a skin infection include redness, warmth, and tenderness, usually accompanied by a break or cut in the skin, but may also look like a small pimple. Your school may also institute additional policies and practices, such as restricting participation in gym or sports teams, should your child develop an active skin infection.

Second, while it is true that one-third of all individuals already have *Staphylococcus aureus* on their skin, most people will never get sick or develop an infection from it. About 1% of the general population already has MRSA, the same bacteria as *Staphylococcus aureus* except that it is a strain that is resistant to common antibiotics, on their skin but **most people will never get sick or develop an infection from MRSA.**

Third, **MRSA is a treatable infection.** While MRSA is resistant to the antibiotics that are commonly prescribed by physicians for skin infections (such as penicillin or cephalosporins, such as Keflex), this infection can be treated in the vast majority of cases by stronger antibiotics that are also prescribed by a physician. While many skin infections do not require an antibiotic at all, it is crucial that if you or your child are prescribed any antibiotic for a skin infection that you notify your physician if the infection does not appear to heal, or improve, after a few days of treatment.

Should you have any questions about MRSA or the management of skin infections, you should contact your physician or health care provider directly. Suffolk County schools are being asked to report any cases of MRSA to the Suffolk County Department of Health Services so that we can better monitor and track cases. For general questions about MRSA or its management, you are also free to contact one of our medical personnel in our department's Division of Public Health, weekdays from 8:30 am to 5:00 pm, at (631) 853-3055.

Attached please find additional information about MRSA, in a handy question-and-answer format, which was provided by the New York State Department of Health. More information about MRSA can be obtained from the following websites: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov/>), the New York State Department of Health (<http://www.health.state.ny.us/>), and the Suffolk County Department of Health Services (<http://www.suffolkcountyny.gov/health>).

Thank you,



Humayun J. Chaudhry, D.O., M.S.
Commissioner

cc: Steve Levy, Suffolk County Chief Executive
Jeffrey Szabo, Deputy County Executive and Chief of Staff
Frederick Pollert, Deputy County Executive for Finance and Management
David Graham, M.D., MPH, Chief Deputy Commissioner of Health
Matthew Miner, Deputy Commissioner of Health
Richard Meyer, Assistant Commissioner of Health
Shaheda Iftikhar, M.D., Director, Division of Patient Care Services

New York State Department of Health

Community-Associated Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus Aureus* (CA-MRSA) - Fact Sheet

Last Reviewed: October 2007

What is *Staphylococcus aureus*?

Staphylococcus aureus (*S. aureus*) is a bacteria normally found on the skin or in the nose of 20 to 30 percent of healthy individuals. When *S. aureus* is present without causing symptoms, it is called colonization. If symptoms are present, it is called an infection.

What is MRSA?

Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) is a strain of *S. aureus* that is resistant to methicillin, an antibiotic in the same class as penicillin, and is traditionally seen in people who have been recently hospitalized or who have been treated at a health care facility (such as treatment at a dialysis center).

What is CA-MRSA?

Community-associated MRSA infections (CA-MRSA) are MRSA infections in healthy people who have not been hospitalized or had a medical procedure (such as dialysis or surgery) within the past year.

Who gets CA-MRSA?

Anyone can get CA-MRSA, however outbreaks have been seen among athletes, prisoners, military recruits, daycare attendees, injection drug users and other groups of people who live in crowded settings and/or routinely share contaminated items. Poor hygiene practices, such as lack of hand washing, may spread the bacteria easily.

What are the symptoms associated with CA-MRSA infection?

CA-MRSA infections typically begin as skin infections. They first appear as reddened areas on the skin, or can resemble pimples that develop into skin abscesses or boils causing fever, pus, swelling, or pain.

How are CA-MRSA infections treated?

CA-MRSA skin infections can be treated by draining any abscesses or boils and providing localized care. Antibiotics can be given if necessary. When left untreated, CA-MRSA infections can progress to serious complications. Visit your health care provider if you think you might have a MRSA infection.

How do I know if I got MRSA from the community or from a health care setting?

Most MRSA infections are found in people who are or have recently been hospitalized. CA-MRSA is usually diagnosed when the patient has an MRSA infection and *has not* had surgery, dialysis, nor been admitted to a hospital or other health care facilities in the past year. CA-MRSA can also be diagnosed when a person has a MRSA infection that began too soon after admission to be acquired in the hospital.

How is it transmitted?

CA-MRSA is spread in the same way as an MRSA infection, mainly through person-to-person contact or contact with a contaminated item such as a towel, clothing or athletic equipment. Bacteria that exist normally on the skin cause CA-MRSA and so it is possible to infect a pre-existing cut not protected by a dressing or other bandage.

How can the spread of CA-MRSA be controlled?

Careful hand washing is the single most effective way to control the spread of CA-MRSA. Skin infections caused by MRSA should be covered until healed, especially to avoid spreading the infection to others. Family members and others with close contact should wash their hands frequently with soap and water. Personal items that may be contaminated (towels, razors, clothing, etc.) should not be shared.

Both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) have issued recommendations for preventing the spread of MRSA among athletes. These include practicing good personal hygiene, including showering after practices and competitions and not sharing personal items such as towels. Athletes who participate in sports where equipment is often collectively used are encouraged to reduce sharing as much as possible and to regularly wipe-down equipment/mats with commercial disinfectants or a 1:100 solution of diluted bleach (one tablespoon bleach in one quart water).

Where can I get further information on CA-MRSA?

- Further information is available on Overview of Community-Associated MRSA on the CDC's Web site or by calling your local health department.
- A Guide for Coaches: Preventing the Spread of Bacteria Among Your Athletes (PDF, 291KB, 2pg.)
- An Athlete's Guide to Prevent the Spread of Bacteria (PDF, 276KB, 2pg.)
- A similar fact sheet on general MRSA infections in health care settings is also available on the NYSDOH website.

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