

News Release



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Health officials release guidelines to prevent skin infections in athletes

Multidisciplinary working group developed recommendations in response to recent increases

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) today released a set of educational materials for athletes, coaches, healthcare providers and others on skin infections and how they can be prevented. The guidance was developed in response to increased infections, including resistant staphylococcal infections and herpes, reported among athletes in recent years.

"Infections in athletes are a serious problem. We need to make sure that effective infection control measures are being used to ensure the safety of athletes," said Dr. Ruth Lynfield, Minnesota State Epidemiologist. National attention has been focused on resistant staphylococcal infections over the past two weeks due to several highly publicized cases of MRSA skin infections leading to the death of young adolescents. An outbreak of herpes infections also led to the interruption of competition among Minnesota high school wrestling in 2006.

MDH convened a multidisciplinary working group over the past five months to identify ways of decreasing the number of skin infections spread between athletes. This group included experts in sports medicine, infectious disease, epidemiology, infection control, dermatology, athletic training, school nursing, coaching, and school leadership. In addition, input was provided from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The group's efforts resulted in the development of a variety of materials for use by athletes, coaches, team leaders, parents and health care providers. The materials are being released through a new MDH Web site at www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/dtopics/athlete/. Included are facts sheets, booklets, brochures, flyers and posters that can be downloaded and printed, as well as information on the Web site itself. Additional information will be added as it is developed in the near future.

MDH and working group members are working on other ways to disseminate the information to coaches, athletes and others. Jerry Reker, a principal at Kasson-Mantorville Senior High School and wrestling official, said, "I feel very strongly that we need to be proactive and take steps to inform athletes about the possible risks of skin infections and ways they can prevent them."

According to Dr. Aaron DeVries, a medical epidemiologist at MDH and chair of the working group, “The greatest risk for passing skin infections between athletes is direct skin-to-skin contact. Sports with a high degree of this type of contact such as wrestling and football have been linked to multiple outbreaks of skin infections.” In a recent study of NCAA wrestlers, skin infections accounted for more than 10 percent of all missed playing time.

The three most important infections are caused by *Staphylococcus aureus*, herpes, and ringworm. Staphylococcal infections, including methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* or MRSA, typically cause simple skin boils but in rare instances can lead to severe, invasive infections. Herpes infections are caused by the same virus that leads to cold sores in the mouth, but on rare occasions can cause scarring sores that recur on the skin or vision loss if the infection occurs near the eye. Ringworm (tinea) is a fungal skin infection that is easily passed between athletes, can be difficult to treat, and can lead to hair loss if it occurs on the scalp.

Relatively simple measures can prevent skin infections from being passed between athletes. The most important measure is frequent hand washing and showering after practices or meets. It is also essential to seek medical attention promptly for new skin problems so that infections can be caught and treated early. Additionally, covering sores or wounds with a water proof bandage, avoiding shared personal items such as towels or razors, and frequent washing of clothes can prevent passing infections from one athlete to another.

Cynthia Hiltz, president of the School Nurse Organization of Minnesota (SNOM) said, “SNOM is glad to have been able to collaborate with MDH to prepare this very important information regarding skin infections in athletes. It remains vital that all of us continue to practice these simple protective measures in order to prevent infectious diseases.”