



COMMENTARY

This story is about a sharp increase in MRSA, a form of the staph bacteria that is extremely dangerous. In fact, schools are closing now out of sheer panic. Through ASSA ABLOY we have a product called MicroShield, an anti-bacteria coating for door handles and other commonly touched surfaces that reduces the spread of germs - another way in which we can protect our kids.

Schools in Several States Report Staph Infections, and Deaths Raise the Alarm

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By IAN URBINA

SANDY SPRING, Md., Oct. 18 — When the football players here at Sherwood High School were not getting the message about washing their uniforms and using only their own jerseys, the school nurse paid a surprise visit to the locker room. She brought along a baseball bat.

“Don’t make me use this,” the nurse, Jenny Jones, said, pointing out that seven players on the team had already contracted a deadly drug-resistant strain of bacteria this year. “Start washing your hands,” she said. “I mean it.”

School officials around the country have been scrambling this week to scrub locker rooms, reassure parents and impress upon students the importance of good hygiene. The heightened alarm comes in response to a federal report indicating that the bacteria, methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA, are responsible for more deaths in the United States each year than AIDS.

MRSA (pronounced MEER-suh) is a strain of staph bacteria that does not respond to penicillin or related antibiotics, though it can be treated with other drugs. The infection can be spread by sharing items, like a towel or a piece of sports equipment that has been used by an infected person, or through skin-to-skin contact with an open wound.

On Wednesday and Thursday, scores of schools were closed and events were canceled in Connecticut, Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio and Virginia as cleaning crews disinfected buses, lockers and classrooms. More closings are planned on Friday.

School officials in Mississippi, New Hampshire and Virginia reported student deaths within the past two weeks from the bacteria, while officials in at least four other states reported cases of students being infected.

The federal report, written by doctors at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that nearly 19,000 people had died in the United States in 2005 after an invasive MRSA infection. The study also suggested that such infections might be twice as common as previously thought.

This week, health officials began reporting a growing number of cases in schools, gyms and day care centers, and not just in nursing homes and hospitals, as has often been the case in the past.

Nicole Coffin, a spokeswoman at the centers, said that while the results of the study are striking, it is important to realize that about 85 percent of the infections reported from the bacteria were in health care settings.



“MRSA in the community is typically a mild skin infection that rarely becomes life-threatening,” she said, adding that even when it does become more severe, the death rates for this type of infection are low.

Here in Sandy Spring, students seem to be getting the message that they need to take extra care.

“I think they’re taking it seriously now,” William Gregory, the principal at Sherwood High School, said of members of the football team. “She is pretty emphatic,” he said, pointing to Ms. Jones. “But the students are also seeing the reports of deaths, and that has reminded them.”

He added that as he visits locker rooms now, the tell-tale stench is gone from athletes’ uniforms, and students are calling him and the nurse diligently when cuts do not seem to be healing.

Elsewhere in the state, more than two dozen staph infections have been reported by four Anne Arundel County high schools over the past three weeks. County officials sent letters to parents explaining that crews have been scrubbing schools with hospital-grade disinfectant.

Ashton Bonds was one of the rare cases of a death from MRSA contracted outside a health care facility. Mr. Bonds, a 17-year-old football player from Staunton River High School in Moneta, Va., died Monday from the bacteria.

“He put up a fight,” said Veronica Bonds, Ashton’s mother. “He was strong. I just think he was just tired, too.”

In response to the death, students throughout the county protested what they called unsanitary conditions in their school buildings.

Although school officials have observed that the bacteria mostly affect student athletes, cases have been reported in children of elementary school age as well.

“I worry about her getting sick anyway, but I don’t want her to catch something that will make her very, very ill,” said Kelli Stammen about her 2-year-old daughter, who attends city-sponsored recreation and library classes in Grove City, Ohio, where a 17-year-old high school student was put in intensive care unit in September with a staph infection.

The C.D.C. study found that 27 percent of all invasive MRSA infections originated in hospitals, while 58 percent began outside of a hospital but in patients with some recent exposure to the health care system.

The remaining 15 percent of invasive MRSA cases originated in the community without any apparent health care risk factor.