

HEALTHY LIVING

Germ warfare

With antibiotics often dicey, prevention is a better strategy for beating staph infections

BY DOROTHY BROOKS

Cox News Service

As a high school football coach, Chris Johnson has seen plenty of skin infections. But this past August, when his 10-year-old son, Luke, who is the quarterback of his west Forsyth County, Ga., youth team, developed what looked like a pimple just above his earlobe, he didn't think much of it — at least not at first.

"It grew over time and got really nasty looking," Johnson says. "My father and I actually opened it up, drained it, and cleaned it out really [thoroughly] because it was hurting him so bad."

Then a similar infection began on Luke's chin, prompting a visit to an emergency center. The doctor drained the new infection and prescribed antibiotics, but by the next day, Luke was in such excruciating pain that Johnson took him to the emergency room, where a doctor drained the infection again, and prescribed more antibiotics.

The wound appeared to be getting better, but then a third pimple began to form in another spot on Luke's chin.

"We didn't take any chances. We took him immediately to his pediatric doctor," Johnson says. "They prescribed him a new medication, and immediately gave him two big injections — one in each of his thighs — that were full of [powerful] antibiotics."

Finally, 10 days after the first pimple appeared, the injected antibiotics brought the infection under control. But the ordeal gave Johnson a new appreciation for how serious skin infections can be.

"It was very scary," he says.

A stubborn, contagious germ

Luke developed a type of bacterial infection that used to be found exclusively in hospitals and other health care settings, but is now increasingly common in the community. Called methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*

or MRSA, the infection does not respond to antibiotics of the beta-lactam family, including methicillin and penicillin, but health experts emphasize — and Luke's case illustrates — there are antibiotics that are usually effective against this so-called superbug.

There have been some deaths linked to the MRSA germ. Last month, a high school student in southern Virginia reportedly died from an MRSA-related infection, but health officials note that the vast majority of MRSA skin infections are mild and responsive to treatment. In recent weeks, a number of metro Atlanta public-school students have been diagnosed with MRSA skin infections, but there have been no serious complications yet reported from these cases.

Further, while there are antibiotics that are effective, medicine is not always the best initial treatment. In fact, a case can be made for holding off on antibiotics for early, mild MRSA infections.

"It is very clear that the overuse of antibiotics drives resistance [to these medicines]," says Dr. Christine Ziebold, an expert on pediatric infectious disease at the University of Iowa Children's Hospital. The hospital is a member of the Children's Miracle Network, which is taking steps to educate the public about MRSA infections.

Ziebold says the infections often heal on their own with no intervention. In other cases, the infection will clear up after a health care provider has simply drained and cleaned the abscess.

"For community-acquired MRSA, there are many options," she says.

Any type of staph infection is easily spread through hand-to-hand contact, or even contact with a towel or solid surface that has been contaminated. Consequently, staph infections tend to occur more frequently among athletes who share equipment and among school children in close contact. In addition, staph infections are more common in the warmer months, and they tend to occur on parts of the body that are sweaty or covered with clothes such as under the arms, in the groin area and the feet.

The best defense: Good hygiene

While MRSA can be treated effectively, especially when it is picked up early, it is nonetheless a dangerous germ, and it is highly contagious, so the best way to protect your family is to practice good hygiene. This includes frequent hand-washing with soap and water.

"The [MRSA bacteria] might be resistant to some antibiotics, but it is not resistant to hand-washing," stresses Nicole Coffin, a



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ELISSA EUBANKS / COX NEWS SERVICE

Staph infections can be surprisingly difficult to treat, but good hygiene stops them before they start.

spokeswoman for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "If you can't get to a sink, you can use an alcohol-based hand rub."

Keeping your clothes laundered and frequently changing your towels and bed linens also can help. And Coffin says it is important not to share personal items such as towels, bed linens or razors. This is especially true if you or another member of your household has a pus-oozing lesion or wound, which is the hallmark of a staph infection. All such wounds need to be kept clean and covered because the drainage from these areas is filled with germs that can spread to other parts of the body, and to other people.

Not long after Luke Johnson picked up the MRSA infection, another member of his team acquired it. That infection was treated quickly and successfully. And his father says vigilant efforts among parents and team staff to sterilize all the athletic equipment has, thus far, prevented the infection from spreading further.

"Simple things actually go a long way toward preventing the spread of these infections, and when implemented, they have actually been [effective] enough to stop an outbreak," Coffin says. ■

— Cox News Service staff writer Bridget Gutierrez contributed to this story.

Staph grows as global concern

BY MARILYN GEEWAX

Cox News Service

The drug-resistant skin infection known as MRSA that recently killed two students is just a small part of a growing worldwide problem, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told Congress earlier this month.

"The problem is much bigger than what we're addressing today," Julie Gerberding, head of the Atlanta-based CDC, said at a Nov. 7 hearing of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

"We need a vaccine" to fight virulent strains of bacteria such as MRSA, or methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, she said.

Gerberding said drug-resistant infections have been around for decades, but typically

they were seen only in sick or elderly patients in hospitals and nursing homes. The concern now is that as bacteria continue to evolve and develop resistance to antibiotics, a "community-acquired" strain of staph is turning up with increasing frequency in people outside of medical settings, she said.

Recently, the virulent form of staph killed a 17-year-old student in Virginia and a 12-year-old boy in New York. The CDC says MRSA kills more than 18,000 people each year and causes serious infections in an additional 94,000 — mostly from the type of staph associated with hospitals and other health care settings.

Worried about infections in schools and gyms, some lawmakers are pushing to establish a nationwide reporting system to track community-acquired MRSA.

"We want to understand how to prevent the transmission of drug-resistant staph infections in the community," said Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), the committee's chairman.

In September, Reps. Jim Matheson (D-Utah) and Michael Ferguson (R-N.J.) introduced the Strategies to Address Antimicrobial Resistance Act to strengthen federal antimicrobial resistance surveillance, boost prevention and control, ensure more research funding and improve coordination among public health groups.

With no vaccine and few new antibiotics available, Gerberding said the CDC is vigorously pushing prevention messages for schools, gyms, boot camps, prisons, nurseries, tattoo parlors and other places where bodies come into close contact. She urged people to wash their hands thoroughly, keep wounds covered and avoid sharing personal items such as razors and towels.

But she also pointed out that the vast majority of young people who get staph infections are successfully treated. And she said school officials don't need to shut down entire buildings when outbreaks occur, but rather should focus on cleaning equipment where bacteria cluster, using bleach and other germicides.

Gerberding said she views MRSA as "the cockroach of bacteria" in that it is unwanted and lurks in many places but should not cause panic. ■

Simple strategies to protect against staph infections

Scientists aren't sure why some healthy people develop stubborn staph infections and others do not, but it's clear that the best way to prevent yourself and your colleagues from coming into contact with staph bacteria is by practicing good personal hygiene. Experts agree that the following steps are particularly effective at preventing staph and other germs from spreading.

- Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly, using warm water and soap. Spend at least 20 seconds rubbing your hands together, rinse the soap off and then dry — preferably with an air dryer or a clean paper towel. If you don't have access to soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Be especially vigilant about hand-washing before you prepare food, after using the bathroom, after blowing your nose or coughing and before and after tending to a cut or wound.
- Keep all cut and wound sites clean and well-covered. This is particularly important with respect to wounds that are oozing pus or fluid, which often is packed with germs.
- Use disinfectants to clean surfaces

that are likely to come in contact with germs. This includes handrails, door knobs, kitchen and bathroom counters, faucets and athletic equipment that is often shared by many people.

- Avoid sharing any personal items such as razors, towels, washcloths, bed linens, uniforms or other clothing.
- Make sure clothing, towels and bed linens are cleaned regularly using warm water and laundry detergent.
- If you like to get pedicures or manicures, make sure you bring your own manicure kit with you, and insist that the technician washes his or her hands before using it.
- Never demand antibiotics when your physician believes they are unnecessary or ineffective in your case. The overuse of antibiotics



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causes germs to build up resistance against them, eventually making the medicines ineffective. ■

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Consumer Specialty Products Association; National Education Association Health Information Network