

# Deadly bacteria easily creep into locker rooms, equipment

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ORLANDO, Fla. -- The deadly bacteria always were contained to hospitals, feasting on people with weak immune systems, people already sick.

But the bacteria have left the hospitals -- and they are stronger, tougher to treat. They are bringing down healthy people, young people. Athletes.

In the fall of 2000, 10 players on a Pennsylvania college football team got staph infections. Seven were hospitalized.

A few years ago, an intern in the athletic trainer's office at the University of Central Florida got staph by scraping his leg against a table. He had to have half his calf removed.

In 2002, two players on a Los Angeles college football team were hospitalized from a staph infection. One athlete's infection was so bad he had to have the infected skin around his wound surgically removed and a skin graft put in place to cover it.

"There are different strains of staph infections -- flesh-eating, bone-eating," said Kevin Mercuri, head trainer for the Orlando Predators and former head trainer for the University of Central Florida. He was there when his intern contracted the staph infection.

"It can be deadly."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says there is not an epidemic -- but it is an increasing problem. It also says other groups of people are also at risk -- people who are incarcerated, homosexuals and children. It's a concern among people who have skin-to-skin contact.

The drug-resistant, community-acquired strain of staph first caught national attention in 1999 when four healthy children, ages 1 to 13, died from staph infections in Minnesota and North Dakota.

Jack Snow, a star wide receiver for the Los Angeles Rams from 1965-75 and a longtime team broadcaster, recently died from a staph infection. He was 62. Though Snow's infection likely stemmed from a hip replacement last spring, his death brought the issue into the spotlight. The infections have become more prevalent and tougher to treat.

Many people live with the bacteria that cause staph infections without it ever causing a problem. The real danger begins when the bacteria -- *Staphylococcus aureus* -- enter the body through a break in the skin.

Doctors used to treat staph infections easily with antibiotics. But in the 1980s, they began to see an increase in infections that common drugs couldn't combat. These cases of staph are called MRSA, or methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*.

Athletes are at a high risk. Anyone can contract a MRSA infection, but athletes are in situations that make it easier for people to spread the germs.

"It's primarily in contact sports -- football, basketball, wrestling, boxing -- in which you have a lot of direct skin-to-skin contact," said Dr. Jaime Carrizosa, a Florida Hospital infectious disease specialist.

In addition to skin-to-skin contact, the infection also can be spread through objects -- shared towels and bars of soap and razors, infected and non-infected players sliding on the same turf. Hot tubs and whirlpools not cleaned properly. Shared equipment led to an outbreak among a fencing team in Colorado in 2003.

Health officials say common sense hygiene -- washing hands frequently with soap and water, cleaning and treating wounds, etc. -- is the best way to lower chances of spreading or contracting infections.

"I'd rather have 100 towels used in practice than have a player come down with staph," said Teddy Arzonico, head trainer for the Orlando Magic, who demands his players never share towels.

The Magic's Grant Hill almost died from a staph infection when his leg turned black and red, his temperature soared to 104 degrees and he began convulsing. Arzonico said his infection likely stemmed from an ankle surgery -- not something he picked up from a teammate or the locker room.

Whether a staph infection is contracted through a hospital procedure or from contact with an infected person in the community, people need to be aware of their bodies -- what is normal, what isn't.

Marquette Smith, coach of the Osceola Outlaws, nearly died from a staph infection contracted through a surgery to fix a torn anterior cruciate ligament during his rookie season with the Carolina Panthers.

The pain from the surgery never ebbed -- it just got worse. Doctors thought Smith just was complaining. Six weeks after surgery, Smith barely could walk. A team doctor felt his knee -- it was hot. He took four vials of green pus from his knee. Within two hours, Smith was on an operating table. He had a staph infection.

Smith said the surgeon warned him that he might have to amputate his leg from the knee down, depending on the severity of the infection.

When he woke up, his leg was intact -- but the battle just was beginning. After the surgery, he had an antibiotic pump attached to his body for two months. His weight dropped from 205 pounds at the time of his ACL surgery to 165. He tried to make a comeback, but he tore his other ACL the next preseason. He never got to play in a regular-season NFL game.

Eighty percent of MRSA cases are contracted through a hospital setting, like Smith's and his ACL surgery. But health officials are keeping a watch on the remaining 20 percent -- cases cropping up around the country in high school gyms and professional playing fields.

"I don't think people should panic about it," said Dr. Lennox Archibald, an epidemiologist at Shands HealthCare, a hospital affiliated with the University of Florida Health Science Center. "But they should be aware of it."

Sentinel correspondent Robyn Shelton contributed to this report.