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## SKIN INFECTIONS - by Todd Conway, MD

Infections (especially skin infections) seem to be kind of a sore subject in the wrestling world. Most everyone involved with the sport has grown to accept that

They are unavoidable right? Remember, knowledge is power. If we understand these problems a little better, maybe from a little different perspective, prevention needs to be our focal point; the treatment options are best left to the care professionals.

The following three skin problems are the most commonly diagnosed in the wrestling room:

Ringworm (Tinea)—caused by fungi

Impetigo (Pyoderma) and the other bacterial infections

Herpes—caused by a virus

These are all types of germs that are constantly looking for a favorable environment to do their thing. That is, reproduce, multiply, and wreak havoc upon

How can we fight off these little creatures? We try and attack them in various ways—we use special cleansers to kill them when we wash our mat. Most wrestlers have had their coaches harping at them about having to shower every day and making sure they shower after practice with antibacterial soap. We meticulously disinfect headgear and shoes as well.

Does all this help? It does not hurt, but there is something even more we can do to prevent these problems!

Everyone understands that infections are infections because they can be transferred from one person to another. Sometimes they can transfer to you from the skin problems transfer primarily by direct contact. This is, unfortunately, something that cannot be avoided in the sport of wrestling.

There is something else that we can do to lessen the likelihood of getting skin infections. Believe it or not, it does have to do with proper nutrition. Our skin has a large percentage of water in it.

It is no secret that dry skin cracks and gets injured more easily. We can make this problem worse by drying out the environment even more. Sometimes, the cracks in the skin can be very small and unnoticed, but in all cases they represent a breakdown in the skin barrier.

Our skin is meant to be a key barrier in our defense against all the bad germs out in the real world. The skin has many different bacteria living on it, and many of them are supposed to be there! Problems arise when certain germs become numerous than they should and/or a breakdown occurs in the barrier. Our body is fighting off these attacks constantly and you do not even know

If a breakdown occurs in the barrier, our body quickly recognizes it and sends troops (white blood cells) to fight off the intruders. If your immune system is not functioning properly, or is in a weakened state, then you can be overwhelmed in battle and the germs can begin to win.

What can weaken your immune system? A lack of rest, stress and poor nutrition, and hydration status can all negatively impact your immune system.

Our skin barrier needs adequate fluids (hydration) to function properly. This is called skin turgor in the medical world. A dehydrated individual will have poor skin turgor. You can pinch the skin and it does not spring back to its usual state quickly. Why? It is lacking fluid. It is not as resilient. This makes it more susceptible to injury as we have discussed.

Our skin barrier also depends upon proper nutrition as it is constantly repairing and generating new cells. We need adequate nutrients for this repair to occur. If our hydration status is low and/or we are not eating properly, it can impair the function of our immune system. Not only are the germs able to get through the barrier, once they are through, we do not mount an assault against them as we should be able to.

Finally, just a few practical suggestions for everyone:

Clean equipment. Make sure you use disinfectants to clean your mat (mat cleaning after practice is ideal). Do not forget to occasionally treat shoes and gear. Good hygiene. Make sure to shower after practice, and use a good soap. There are some skin barrier products on the market. These products should be applied before practice. How do these barrier products work? The active ingredient that has some antibacterial properties combined with moisturizers. Never forget: dry, dehydrated skin is susceptible to immune system breakdown. The barrier products are okay if your program can afford them, however, be considered a luxury, not a necessity.

Fluids first; stay hydrated! This is your first line of defense! Keep your skin healthy and resilient. It will make a difference!

Proper nutrition. This is vital for a healthy immune system to defend and repairing your skin. This is your key line of defense. Do not neglect

The only thing about wrestling that we cannot do anything about is skin-to-skin contact. It is the nature of the sport. If, however, we do everything else right, these other issues, we will have done all we can do.

I want to conclude this article by talking briefly about two other immune system problems. First, if you are sick with a cold, or the flu, stay home! If you have to go to practice, you will simply expose your teammates to the same germs (typically viruses).

The Herpes viruses are just a small subset of the literally hundreds of viruses out in the real world. They are very contagious and just a few sneezes in a wrestling room with infected droplets that everyone can breathe in can start an outbreak. It may take a few days (or weeks) to incubate and grow, but it will most likely "kick your butt" until your immune system can gear up to properly identify it, and ultimately destroy the virus.

Do not forget the common sense things. There should be no sharing of towels. It quickly spreads in this way as well. Remember, antibiotics do not work on the overwhelming majority of viruses. The exceptions to this rule are the antibiotics for herpes and Influenza A and B.

What can you do? You need to rest and drink plenty of fluids. Do everything you can to maximize your immune system. You cannot hurry the process; it will take time.

Finally, a quick word on blood exposures. I wholeheartedly agree with the caution and precaution that is taken to avoid blood exposures. It should come as no surprise, however, like to point out that the risk of any wrestler contracting a blood-borne disease by simply getting blood on your skin is very, very unlikely. In fact, in "needle stick" exposures in the health care field, the risk of transmitting an infection is very unlikely.

That does not mean that we do not take "needle sticks" seriously. In fact, we do, however, the actual chance of an infectious problem developing is quite remote. Having someone's blood splash onto your skin is, in itself, a low risk problem. There is no need to let it freak you out.

Todd Conway is a former wrestler who attended the University of Illinois. He is a certified physician. He is the author of "Wrestling with Weight". More details on his book can be found at [WrestlingWithWeight.com](http://WrestlingWithWeight.com)

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