



Warning on skin infections in athletes

Health officials concerned about hard-to-treat staph
The Associated Press

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ATLANTA - Health and sports officials are warning schools and sports teams about a hard-to-treat skin infection once common to hospitals and prisons that's now plaguing athletes on the playing field.

The National Federation of State High School Associations sent a warning Tuesday to states about a staph infection that can't be cured by the usual penicillin-related antibiotics.

On Monday the NCAA's medical committee urged college athletic departments to watch out for the infections and practice careful hygiene.

Though usually mild, methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) can progress to a life-threatening blood or bone infection. Several athletes who got the infection have been hospitalized.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said the infection, which can look like an ordinary skin wound or a boil, is often not diagnosed or ends up being treated with antibiotics that can't cure it. Symptoms include fever, pus, swelling or pain.

"It's important for coaches and for parents to be aware MRSA might be a cause of skin problems in children," said Dr. Dan Jernigan, CDC medical epidemiologist.

Athletes should tell their coaches of any wounds, which should be covered. If a wound can't be covered, the player should be excluded from the sport until he gets appropriate treatment or the wound heals, Jernigan said.

Most cases in close-contact sports

Most often affected are those playing close-contact sports, but in one case, fencing was involved.

"It's not uncommon in contact sports such as football and wrestling where we have contagious skin conditions," said Jerry Diehl, assistant director for the high school federation. He said proper equipment cleaning is needed to prevent the infections.

The CDC also recommended avoiding contact with other players' skin lesions, better hygiene and no sharing of towels or personal items.

Earlier this month, a 17-year-old high school football player in Wisconsin was hospitalized with MRSA and six of his teammates also were treated. In August, seven University of Southern California football players were infected, and four were hospitalized.

The CDC noted that five Colorado fencers were infected in February. Team members shared sensor wires, which record hits by an opponent's weapon, under their clothing and the wires were not regularly cleaned, the CDC said.

In January, a pair of Indiana high school wrestlers were infected; last year, two college football players were hospitalized from the infection, and in 2000, 10 Pennsylvania college football players

were infected, the CDC added.

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