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Staph infections seen in Florida prep players

By **ANDREW ABRAMSON**
Cox News Service
Friday, October 06, 2006

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Donald Law never heard of a staph infection until a doctor discovered one on his underarm.

"It looked like a normal boil, but I couldn't move my arm above my shoulder," said Law, Wellington High School's starting sophomore tailback. "And it hurt."

Law, who likely contracted the infection from his shoulder pads rubbing against exposed skin, had to have the infected area drained and he sat out last week's game.

He is one of numerous high school football players in Palm Beach County and the Treasure Coast to be treated in the past two seasons for a bacterial skin infection. Last year, the Palm Beach County school board, alarmed over the growing number of cases, formed a committee to research MRSA — Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus Aureus — a type of staph infection that has become prevalent the past several years.

The committee has since distributed literature on MRSA and tips on proper hygiene to county athletic directors. Jay Stewart, the athletic director for St. Lucie County schools, said he has met with his athletic directors to discuss the spread of staph infections, which are often contracted from skin-to-skin contact, contaminated items, crowding and poor hygiene, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Of the 44 area football coaches contacted for this story, 15 said that in the past two years at least one player on their team had a skin infection. Eleven of the coaches used the term staph; three used the term impetigo, a bacterial infection usually caused by staph; and one coach said he wasn't sure what was on his players' arms and legs.

There is no school board policy about reporting cases of infection in athletics, but Pahokee coach Leroy Foster said he had nine athletes with staph infections this season and Seminole Ridge's Matt Dickmann said five of his players had infections.

An assistant coach at King's Academy might have to have his finger amputated because of a staph infection. Park Vista reported at least four cases of impetigo in the past couple of weeks.

At least five players at Lake Worth currently have undetermined skin infections.

A Jupiter player missed 10 days of summer training camp with staph.

Clewiston had a case of impetigo last week, and Glades Day had a staph infection this season.

John Carroll reported two staph infections from 2005 and Centennial, Inlet Grove, Spanish River and St. Andrew's all had isolated staph cases last season.

"To our knowledge, at this point, we're not feeling that there's an epidemic going on," said Dr. Monroe Benaim, a Palm Beach County school board member who was on the MRSA research committee.

But Benaim, considering the number of players with infections at Pahokee, also said, "If we heard there were nine cases at one school, that would be a very big concern."

Larry Bush, a Wellington doctor who said he has treated several players for staph, called the threat of infection "epidemic."

MRSA, a type of staph that is resistant to many antibiotics, is becoming an increasing concern.

"The staph everyone is contracting is MRSA," Bush said.

Yetta Green, the athletics administrator for the Palm Beach County school district, said she knew of two schools that had athletes with staph this year, but numerous area coaches told The Post of more infections.

"Last August, when (the school board) met again, there seemed to be some concern that not everybody was seeing the possibilities of what (MRSA) could be," Green said.

Most coaches said their players had mild cases of staph or impetigo. The players took antibiotics and had their infected areas bandaged. Some didn't miss a single day of practice.

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Others had boils either drained or lanced to prevent further complications.

But staph can become very serious if it infects the blood.

Two weeks ago, Chris Russell, a junior varsity assistant coach at King's Academy, was hospitalized for eight days after contracting staph in one of his middle fingers. Two JV football players at King's also were infected with staph, varsity coach Craig Dobson said.

Russell said he repaired the helmet of a player who contracted staph behind his ear. Russell's doctor told him he might have to amputate the finger if the infection worsens — he'll be on strong antibiotics for the next six weeks.

"In the past I've torn my ACL and my MCL," Russell said. "This pain was 10 times worse."

Many area coaches believe players with infections aren't reporting to team trainers or seeking proper treatment.

"The macho image is all of a sudden, 'I've got a rash, I'm not going to tell anybody,'" Jupiter coach Charlie Persson said.

Benaim is concerned that parents aren't taking the threat seriously, or don't know about it.

"Going to the doctors these days is expensive with the deductibles, co-payments and everything," Benaim said. "Parents see a little skin infection and they just go to Walgreens and buy Neosporin."

Post-practice and post-game hygiene is important in preventing the spread of infection. Locker rooms, the CDC warns, are a breeding ground for staph.

"High school kids today don't shower and it's really kind of gross," Fort Pierce Central coach Chris Hutchings said. "Kids just sit around in their gear."

Hutchings said one player told him he's too tired after games to shower, so he goes home and sleeps on the floor.

Nearly every coach interviewed expressed concern about showering habits. Only one school, Okeechobee, requires its players to shower after practices and games.

And while several schools wash practice uniforms on a daily basis, most schools leave it up to the players.

Pahokee's Foster said some of his players are responsible about washing their uniforms, but others simply throw them into their locker after practice.

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"Routine hygiene is one of the first steps (against infection)," said Dr. Richard Barfield of Jupiter Urgent Care. "It's not going to stop it, but it will certainly limit and reduce some unnecessary MRSA infections."

Barfield said he sees up to five high school athletes a week with staph, and he said wrestling is another sport with a serious risk factor. Benjamin football coach Ron Ream said he disinfected the locker room last spring after "a couple" of wrestlers had staph infections.

Private schools have a financial edge in combating infection. St. Andrew's coach George McCartin said that after a case of staph last year, the school paid a sanitizing company \$8,000 to clean the locker room and equipment.

Summit Christian hasn't had any reported cases of staph, but football coach and athletic director Rock Knapp said the school "just spent our biggest bill of the year — and that was our medical bill — to prevent injury and keep a sterile environment."

Public schools do pay for safety-related items such as defibrillators and lightning detectors, but measures to prevent the spread of infection do not fall under that category, Green said.

"This is something that I just can't do by myself," Green said. "We would have to get healthcare people involved."

Meanwhile, at Seminole Ridge, coach Dickmann took an aggressive approach to prevention. After five players contracted staph, he sent letters to parents stressing the dangers of MRSA.

Doctors Bush and Barfield said that everyone involved in high school sports needs to take responsibility.

"It's easy to criticize the schools, and yes, they're doing some things wrong," Barfield said. "But so are the kids, the parents, and so are the doctors (who are misdiagnosing)."

"This is a problem that could get out of control and it's a problem without a good solution."

Andrew Abramson writes for The Palm Beach Post.

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