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Staph Infections Outside Hospitals

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(CBS) Drug-resistant staph infections have traditionally been acquired in hospitals. But increasingly they are appearing in the community at large, especially where people are in close quarters like gyms, locker rooms, military barracks and prisons.

The Early Show medical correspondent **Dr. Emily Senay** reports new research in Thursday morning's New England Journal of medicine shows that more and more people are getting drug-resistant staph infections outside of the hospital.

Researchers looked at data on staph infections in Baltimore, Atlanta and Minnesota, and found overall that 17 percent of the cases of drug-resistant staph infections - more than 2,000 cases - could not be traced back to a hospital.

The research does not provide a complete picture of the problem, but the data indicates a significant and alarming increase in these infections in the general community, especially amongst children.

Staph refers to a group of bacteria commonly found on the skin. Staph is not always dangerous, and lives in the nose of many healthy adults and most children without causing problems.

When skin is cut or scraped, staph can enter the body and cause an infection that usually clears up after a couple of days. But if these infections worsen or the bacteria have become resistant to antibiotics, they can spread to cause pneumonia, bone infections, or life-threatening infections of the bloodstream.

Staph bacteria have been exposed to numerous kinds of antibiotics over the years, and some strains have become resistant to the usual antibiotics and difficult to treat.

The good news is that there are still some antibiotics, which can kill these superbugs, but serious staph infections now require a test to determine the strain and the appropriate treatment.

What can people do to avoid staph infection?

Simple preventive measures includes regular hand washing, cleaning and covering wounds, avoiding sharing towels, razors, clothing and athletic equipment, disinfecting public pools and whirlpools, and installing antibacterial soap dispensers.

Not all staph infections are serious enough to warrant urgent care and many will go away without any major complications.

Warning Signs

People should seek medical attention if an infection becomes more painful, or a large boil develops, or the infection seems to spreading from the original site such as redness spreading over the skin. If fever or chills develop, urgent care should also be sought. If boils or abscesses appear suddenly and grow rapidly, it's also a sign of a virulent infection.

It's important to see a doctor right away because an untreated staph infection can be life-threatening if it reaches the heart.

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