

MRSA: Health Officials Urge Calm

November 1, 2007 – Henderson County, NC: Sporadic cases of Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, also called MRSA, have been reported across the county. MRSA is a staph infection that is not killed by many of the antibiotics doctors prescribe most commonly for staph infections.

Linda Weldon, communicable disease supervisor at the health department said, "There are no clusters of cases that we are aware of; however, there are some individual cases. Individual cases are not reportable according to NC law. Reports of cases are coming from students and parents through the school system, not through doctor's offices or the usual reporting mechanisms at the local health department. Clusters are reportable and of a higher level of concern. A cluster would be several cases in one classroom or a sports team, not just in a school."

Staph bacteria are one of the most common causes of skin infections in the US. Staph infections are so common that 25-30 percent of people have it living on their skin at any one time. MRSA is a less common variety of staph that isn't affected by common antibiotics, such as penicillin.

"I think what's causing concern is when people hear that the infection is resistant to antibiotics, there is a fear that there is no treatment for the infection. There are actually other antibiotics that can be used to treat the infection. Staph and MRSA infections are treatable with antibiotics," said Weldon.

MRSA is usually transmitted by direct skin-to-skin contact or contact with shared items or surfaces that have come into contact with someone else's infection. Staph bacteria including MRSA can cause skin infections that may look like a pimple or boil and can be red, swollen, painful, or have pus or other drainage. People with skin infections should be seen by a health care provider.

"According to the Centers for Disease Control, it is not necessary to close schools because of a MRSA infection in a student," said Tom Bridges, Health Director. "The CDC also does not recommend closing schools to 'disinfect' them when MRSA infections occur. It is important to note that MRSA transmission can be prevented by simple measures such as hand washing and covering infections."

Sheila Devine, school nurse supervisor, said "Henderson County Schools have been very proactive in exercising preventive measures such as hand washing, hand sanitizers, spray bottles with disinfectant to sanitize surfaces, and advising parents about good hygiene. The school nurses and the communicable disease nurse are available for consultation with the schools and we are monitoring the situation. We have excellent communication with school administration, teachers, and staff."

The CDC recommends, students with a MRSA skin infection should not be excluded from attending school unless directed by a physician. Students with active infections should be excluded from activities where skin-to-skin contact is likely to occur (e.g. sports) until their infections have healed. Students with wound drainage that can not be covered and contained and those who cannot maintain good personal hygiene should be excluded.

"Practicing good hygiene, keeping hands clean by washing with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer and showering immediately after participating in exercise are all ways to prevent MRSA. It is also important to cover new cuts or abrasions to the skin with a clean, dry bandage until healed to prevent bacteria from entering the broken skin. People should also avoid sharing personal care items such as towels and razors that come into contact with bare skin and using a barrier between the skin and shared equipment such as weight-training benches" said Weldon.

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