



## **Getting the message on MRSA**

November 6, 2007

Dear School Administrators, Communications Officers, and Nurses:

There has been intense media attention over reported cases of a Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus (MRSA) infection in two Port Townsend schools.

While this is a very real health concern, it is important to know that MRSA is a treatable infection, although not all antibiotics are effective.

Public health officials tell us that common signs of a skin infection include redness, warmth, swelling and tenderness. Often a MRSA infection will look like a spider bite, boil, abscess or turf burn. If it is left untreated, it could progress to a more serious illness.

The Port Townsend story has been picked up by the Seattle media and linked inappropriately to the recent death of a 45-year-old King County resident, as well as other well-publicized national cases.

According to public health officials, the facts of the Port Townsend cases are: A high school football player was reportedly diagnosed and treated for an uncomplicated MRSA skin infection. One other high school student is being evaluated, but no culture results are yet available. There is no evidence of person-to-person transmission or a facility-specific outbreak. The Port Townsend School District on Monday confirmed a second case of a drug-resistant staph infection at one of its elementary schools.

As with all situations that bring widespread media attention, this provides an opportunity for public health education and greater cooperation between schools, local health jurisdictions, and medical providers.

There are several larger issues that we should be aware of statewide:

- 1) We strongly encourage school officials to consult with local health jurisdictions **before** they take any actions.
- 2) Public health officials say we need to underscore the fact that “MRSA” is a collection of different bacterial strains that are **treatable** with some antibiotics and not treatable by others. It is by no means untreatable.
- 3) Many people associate risk of MRSA transmission with certain facilities (especially schools and hospitals) and believe that extraordinary disinfection measures are necessary and effective. There is no evidence that mega-disinfection of facilities is necessary or effective outside of certain hospital settings. Hospital disinfection protocols are quite rigorous but it is not practical to transfer them to schools and other public places. The public health message on MRSA prevention needs to be focused on behavior, not facility focused.
- 4) The national story, "MRSA more deadly than AIDS," may be factually true but misses the point. The Centers for Disease Control [CDC] and the American Medical Association are sounding the alarm as well. Death from antibiotic resistant infections is a significant preventable cause of mortality. We solve it by assuring universal access to high quality health care at early stages of invasive bacterial infections.

Helpful guidance for school officials adapted from Dr. Thomas Locke, Jefferson County Health Officer, whose region includes Port Townsend:

- 1) Immediately consult with your local health jurisdiction and your school nurse **before** contacting the media or canceling events or sending letters out to parents.
- 2) Limit the use of the term MRSA, if you can. It has been deemed a Superbug by the media. Public health officials refer instead to "Staph skin infections that are resistant to some antibiotics"

- 3) Stress the basics -- hand washing, personal hygiene, wound care, early recognition and treatment of skin and soft tissue infections. Environmental disinfection has a role but it is relatively minor.
- 4) Work with your local media. Local coverage has been a lot more balanced than regional media coverage.
- 5) Work as a team with your local health officer and school nurse. They have the accurate, up-to-date information to distribute.
- 6) Don't downplay the potential seriousness of invasive bacterial infections, but keep it in context -- skin infections are common, but life-threatening complications are rare.
- 7) And make use of the excellent web-based resources out there:

The state Department of Health Website has great MRSA resources, including general information in English and Spanish about what MRSA is, how it is spread and steps people can take to prevent it, at:

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/Topics/Antibiotics/MRSA.htm>.

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department has excellent material, including MRSA toolkits for middle and high schools at:

<http://www.tpchd.org/index.php>

If you have questions about MRSA or a related situation in your community, I urge you contact your local health officer. A list is available through OSPI at:

<http://www.k12.wa.us/HealthServices/pubdocs/CountyCoordinator.doc>.

I think you will find these materials very helpful for you and parents who want to know more.

OSPI Health Services Director Gayle Thronson has distributed this information to school nurses.

Below you will find a sample letter that you could send to parents outlining the public health facts and offering sources where they can get more information. As always, please feel free to edit the letter as is appropriate for your local community.

Thank you for your efforts to keep your students and their families safe and informed.

Sincerely,

Terry Bergeson  
Superintendent of Public Instruction

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Dear Parents:

You may have heard or seen recent news coverage regarding MRSA (Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus) and may be understandably concerned about your child's health.

Health officials tell us that MRSA is essentially a staph infection that is resistant to most antibiotics. It has been in the news lately because of a new national report about the number of cases in the United States and reports of cases of the illness at schools.

While this is a very real health concern, it is important to know that MRSA is a treatable infection, although not all antibiotics are effective against it.

I wanted to make sure that you are aware of some great resources on the state Department of Health Website at <http://www.doh.wa.gov/Topics/Antibiotics/MRSA.htm>.

There you will find a Question and Answer section about MRSA in schools. There is also some general information in English and Spanish about what MRSA is, how it is spread, and steps people can take to prevent it.

Principal