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**SUPERBUGS: DRUG RESISTANT GERMS ON THE RISE**

There's a new bug in town and it is causing quite a stir. It's not an insect, but a new category of drug-resistant bacteria that is infecting thousands of people in the United States and is creeping into Mendocino County.

Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) infections have increased significantly in the United States and are causing much alarm in the local medical community.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) *Staphylococcus aureus*, often referred to simply as "staph," are bacteria commonly carried on the skin or in the nose of healthy people. Approximately 25% to 30% of the population is colonized (when bacteria are present, but not causing an infection) in the nose with staph bacteria.

Staph bacteria are one of the most common causes of skin infections in the United States. Most of these skin infections are minor, such as pimples and boils, and can be treated without antibiotics, but the germ can cause serious surgical wound infections, bloodstream infections and pneumonia.

**When Staph turns into MRSA**

As antibiotics were developed, staph became resistant to them. The resistance started with penicillin. A new group of antibiotics were discovered, including ampicillin, and the bacteria quickly became resistant to them. Then, a third group of antibiotics were discovered, called methicillin, which are very good at fighting staph, but now there's more and more resistance of staph to this antibiotic as well.

Previously, hospitals were the only places you would need to be concerned about these stubborn bacteria, but in a study published on April 7, 2005 in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, community-acquired MRSA infections have dramatically risen, somewhere between 8 and 20 percent.

Now doctors are seeing resistant strains not only among high-risk populations, including those in extremely close living conditions and those practicing poor hygiene, but have seen MRSA infection rates grow among children and athletes.

### **Germ 'now a community problem'**

Overall, the study found an increase of antibiotic-resistant staph infections were caught in the community and did not have any apparent links to healthcare settings.

"Close to one-fifth of what used to be a hospital-specific problem is now a community problem. And that's a large number," said the CDC's Dr. Scott K. Fridkin. "We didn't think it would be anywhere near that high when we started the study."

Researchers at the CDC suspected that MRSA infections outside of healthcare facilities might just be leaking out of hospitals rather than emerging from the general population. But their study proved that theory wrong.

In a second study in the journal, researchers reported that drug-resistant staph has acquired "flesh-eating" capabilities and caused 14 cases of rare *necrotizing fasciitis* in the Los Angeles area. All needed surgery and 10 patients were in intensive care.

The number of community-acquired infections among teenagers is dramatically increasing as well. According to the CDC, outbreaks of community-acquired MRSA are on the rise among high school and college sports teams.

It's so bad that the National Federation of State High School Associations has sent out numerous warnings to states about an infection that can't be cured by the usual penicillin-related antibiotics. The NCAA's medical committee has also urged college athletic departments to be on alert for the infections and to practice careful hygiene.

"The bugs are winning, unfortunately, and we need to catch up," said Dr. Loren G. Miller, one of the researchers at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. "We really need to rapidly develop antibiotics to catch up with the bugs and start using antibiotics more appropriately."

### **The local concern**

In Ukiah, community-acquired MRSA is growing rapidly. There were only two cases seen in the emergency room (ER) at Ukiah Valley Medical Center (UVMC) in May 2003 compared to 35 cases seen in the ER in July 2005.

"We are seeing a rise in the number of community-acquired MRSA cases in our community," said Dr. Johanna Brown, a specialist of infectious diseases in Ukiah. "While it's still a bit of an up and down trend month to month, when you look at the overall cases over the past two years, the number of community-acquired MRSA cases is dramatically increasing," said Dr. Brown.

According to UVMC Infection Control Nurse Sue Mason, RN, the hospital has been taking precautions against MRSA for a long time, "We take many special precautions to prevent the spread of MRSA. We put MRSA patients in Contact Precautions which means anyone who will walk into the room to visit or care for the patient must practice excellent hand hygiene, wear gloves and wear a disposable gown."

Mendocino County Public Health Officer Dr. Marvin Trotter said, "Since the discovery of antibiotics, we have had antibiotic resistance, and the more antibiotics we use as a society, the more resistant bacteria we're going to get. So we have to do two things as a society: cut down on

unnecessary uses of antibiotics in both humans and farm animals and we have to develop new antibiotics so that we can keep ahead of the curve.”

### **Staying healthy**

Avoiding MRSA infections is surprisingly simple: follow mom’s advice.

“If you get a wound or cut, try to keep it clean and dry” Dr. Trotter said, and don’t share towels or washcloths. You should also take antibiotics only when necessary. Most importantly, he said, “Wash hands; wash hands; wash hands.”

“Several studies found standard soap and 10 to 15 seconds of scrubbing to be an effective way to get rid of bacteria,” said Mason. “The alcohol based gels are even more effective than traditional hand-washing and are very convenient. You don’t need any water or towels to use them and they can be purchased at many local stores. In fact I carry a small bottle in my purse,” said Mason.

“Remember the basics,” said Dr. Trotter. “Prevention is the key to beating MRSA. Practice good hygiene, clean and cover wounds and don’t share towels.”

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*Ukiah Valley Medical Center is part of Adventist Health, a not-for-profit, faith-based health system operating in California, Hawaii, Oregon and Washington. Founded on the Seventh-day Adventist heritage of Christian health care, Adventist Health is comprised of 20 hospitals with more than 3,100 beds, 18,800 employees, numerous clinics and outpatient facilities, 16 home care agencies and three joint-venture retirement centers. Locally, UVMC and Howard Memorial Hospital partner to provide Mendocino and Lake County Residents the very best in healthcare. For more information, visit [www.uvmc.org](http://www.uvmc.org) or [www.adventisthealth.org](http://www.adventisthealth.org).*