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Northwest Michigan Community Health Agency

HEALTH
DEPARTMENT
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Common sense precautions prevent spread of staph infections

(October 23, 2007) Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus Aureus*, (MRSA), a certain type of Staph infection, made state and national news last week, frightening some people about an infectious Staph “superbug” that cannot be easily treated with antibiotics. Despite the headlines, public health officials say Staph infections, even MRSA infections, are quite common, easily prevented with proper hygiene, and heal well with treatment.

“Anyone can get an infection caused by Staph bacteria,” said Joshua Meyerson, MD, Medical Director for the Health Department of Northwest Michigan. “People are more likely to get Staph infections if they have skin-to-skin contact with someone who already has the infection or they contact items or surfaces that have Staph bacteria on them. You are at greater risk if you have cuts or scrapes in your skin.”

Meyerson said the best defense against getting a Staph infection is to practice proper hygiene:

- Keep your hands clean by washing thoroughly with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. “Washing with soap and water is fine,” Meyerson said. “You do not need special antibacterial soap. Be sure to scrub your hands for at least 15 seconds.”
- Keep cuts and scrapes clean and covered with a bandage until healed.
- Avoid contact with other people’s wounds or bandages.
- Avoid sharing personal items such as towels or razors.

Keeping surfaces clean, especially high-touch or soiled surfaces like door knobs, phones, and sports equipment, is important in preventing many kinds of infections, including Staph and MRSA. Use cleaning products designed to kill germs, such as diluted bleach, Lysol, or PineSol. To be sure surfaces are disinfected, follow label instructions for appropriate dilutions and contact times.

Skin infections caused by Staph may look like pimples or boils. They may be red, swollen, painful, or have pus or other drainage. Sometimes wounds or scrapes have honey colored drainage. More serious infections can cause pneumonia or blood stream infections. “If you think you may have a Staph infection, see your doctor right away,” Meyerson said. “Staph and MRSA infections are treatable.”

If you are given an antibiotic, take all of the doses, even if the infection is getting better, unless your doctor tells you to stop taking it, he said. Antibiotics are not always required; sometimes Staph skin infections are treated by draining the abscess or boil and may not require antibiotics. “Only health care providers should drain skin boils or abscesses,” Meyerson emphasized.

If you have a Staph skin infection, Meyerson says it is very important to keep your wound covered. “Wounds that are draining or have pus should be covered with clean, dry bandages. Follow your healthcare provider’s instructions on proper care of the wound. Pus from infected wounds can contain Staph, so keeping the infection covered will help prevent the spread to others.” Bandages or tape can be discarded with the regular trash, he said.

When you have a contagious infection, it is very important that you avoid sharing personal items such as towels, washcloths, razors, clothing, or uniforms that may have had contact with the infected wound or bandage. Wash sheets, towels, and clothes that become soiled with water and laundry detergent. Drying clothes in a hot dryer, rather than air-drying, also helps kill bacteria in clothes. Finally, talk with your doctor. Tell your healthcare providers you have or had a Staph skin infection.

The Health Department of Northwest Michigan is mandated by the Michigan Public Health Code to promote wellness, prevent disease, provide quality healthcare, address health problems of vulnerable populations, and protect the environment for the residents and visitors of Antrim, Charlevoix, Emmet, and Otsego counties. For additional information about Staph or MRSA infections, visit www.cdc.gov.

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