

Subject: for web infections
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Governments urged to make killer bugs a priority

By Robert Davis and Jennie Coughlin

A killer bacteria known as MRSA has been a growing problem for years, particularly in hospitals and nursing homes. But in a week's time, it has moved to the front burner of public attention, turning a spotlight — and increasing criticism — on the nation's public health system.

A landmark study indicating MRSA kills 18,000 Americans each year, along with reports of outbreaks in schools across the nation and the death of a high school student in Virginia, has renewed calls for more aggressive government action to help prevent the spread of the "super bug" — a bacteria named methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus.

STRAIN POPS UP IN SCHOOLS

Besides the MRSA infection that killed Moneta, Va., teenager Ashton Bonds this week, there have been other recent outbreaks or suspected outbreaks of the strain in schools across the USA:

Connecticut: At least two high school students one in Weston, another in Newtown have been diagnosed, school officials say.

Indiana: Crews disinfected Richmond High School's locker rooms and gym after a student got a staph infection that officials fear is MRSA.

Maryland: Schools in Montgomery County have reported 14 cases of MRSA infection and two dozen other suspected cases. Those with confirmed infections are doing fine after treatment, officials say. Anne Arundel County schools have recorded one infection; Howard County has confirmed two cases in a high school.

Michigan: A Troy High School football player has MRSA.

North Carolina: At least six football players at East Forsyth High School have MRSA infections. East Forsyth officials are sanitizing locker rooms and equipment.

Virginia: Six reported cases in Fairfax County high schools.

West Virginia: Seven cases reported in Berkeley, Boone and Logan county schools this week. Students and staff have been advised to wash their hands frequently. Schools across the state are being disinfected.

The Associated Press

Patient-safety advocates, government health specialists and local officials acknowledge that the nation has not done enough to halt the rapidly rising death rate from a germ that, despite its resistance to antibiotics, is easy to stop with soap and water before it burrows into the body.

"We have the knowledge to stop this problem," says Betsy McCaughey, chairman of the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths. "What has been lacking is the will." McCaughey and other health specialists say that slowing the death rates will require action on several fronts, from public health facilities, hospitals, schools and individuals.

"The medical community has to do a lot more to prevent these infections in the first place," says Elizabeth Bancroft, an epidemiologist at the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. "The public health community has to do a lot more education for patients."

The U.S. government has documented increases in MRSA deaths for 20 years, but McCaughey and other critics say it has not forced the simple changes that would prevent needless deaths.

McCaughey recounts horror stories from families who lost loved ones to the infection because hospitals did not follow cleanliness practices such as mandatory hand washing by doctors and nurses.

She faults the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Their lax guidelines have given hospitals an excuse to do too little," she says. "They have consistently understated the problem and done too little to stop it. Every year of delay is costing thousands of lives and costing billions of dollars."

John Jernigan, an MRSA expert at the CDC, says the agency has "the best MRSA guidelines out there." They call for hospitals and health care facilities to fund prevention programs, track infection rates, teach staff members the best infection-control practices and ensure those are followed.

But Jernigan agrees health care facilities must focus on prevention. "We're saying hospitals should not rest until they are seeing a reduction in the rates," he says.

Research published this week in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* estimates that there are more than 94,000 MRSA infections in the USA each year. And while MRSA kills more people than HIV and AIDS, according to the report, deaths rarely are tracked.

RISKS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

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Risk factors for MRSA infection:

- Hospitalization within the last 12 months, nursing-home residency, surgery or catheterization.
- Those who have crowded living spaces (homeless shelters, camps, boarding schools, day care centers).
- Those taking drugs by injection.
- People who are incarcerated.
- Participants in contact sports.
- Those who recently or frequently use antibiotics.

Reducing the risk of infection:

MRSA in community settings is most often transmitted through direct physical contact with an infected person. But it can also be transmitted by contact with contaminated surfaces or items.

- Wash hands often, using soap or an alcohol gel.
- Use air blowers or paper towels rather than shared towels.
- Don't share personal items such as soap, razors or clippers.
- Wash linens and clothing in detergent and water (at least 160 degrees) for 25 minutes or more.
- While exercising, cover legs and arms to protect skin from abrasions. Keeping the skin intact is one of the most important ways to guard against infection. If the skin is injured, wash immediately with soap and warm water, dry and cover with a clean bandage.
- In the home, regularly clean commonly touched areas, such as doorknobs and light switches, with a disinfectant. Mixing one tablespoon of bleach to one quart of water is an inexpensive disinfectant.

Source: USA TODAY research

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