

More Thorough Cleaning Help Prevents the Spread of MRSA

By Robert Kravitz

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On October 1, 2010, Chicago's Loyola University kicked off an event in honor of the first-ever World MRSA Day, October 2, 2010. Its goal was to focus attention on the problem of MRSA. And it all began with a ceremony in remembrance of the more than 20,000 Americans that die each year from MRSA infections. MRSA (pronounced meer-sa) is an acronym for methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, also known as the "superbug." The disease, which can cause deadly infections, is resistant to most antibiotics. It can be treated only by using a variety of superpowerful antibiotics, but even then, as we have seen, thousands still die.

MRSA is frequently acquired by patients, young and old, in healthcare facilities. However, healthcare facilities are not the only locations where MRSA can be contracted. According to a September 2010 report by the University of Cincinnati (UC), "we are now seeing more people coming into a hospital with MRSA" than acquiring it in the hospital. And areas where people appear to be most often coming into contact with the disease include gyms—private, public, and in schools.

The following questions and answers are designed to help athletic directors and facility managers keep their gyms and locker rooms clean, healthy, and free not only from MRSA but from many other infections and diseases as well.

What exactly is MRSA?

According to the UC report, MRSA is a bacterium that causes infection. Outside of medical facilities, it is seen a lot in contact sports because people slam into each other and can easily break their skin. This is also how it can be spread in gyms and locker rooms. The bacterium finds a home on surfaces such as floors, benches, and gym equipment.

Is MRSA a new disease?

No. The first official case of MRSA was detected in 1961 in a British hospital. Shortly afterward, it was noted in other European hospitals. There were also a small number of isolated cases in the United States; however, the numbers jumped dramatically after 1999. By 2005, the number of people dying of MRSA surpassed the number of people dying of AIDS.

Is there a way athletic directors and facility managers can test for MRSA in their gyms?

The best scientific tools available are ATP rapid monitoring devices. These are relatively inexpensive handheld computers that detect adenosine triphosphate—an energy molecule found in all living things—on surfaces. Although a high ATP reading does not indicate that MRSA specifically is present, it serves as a warning that contaminants may be present and more thorough cleaning of the area is necessary.

Is cleaning the most effective way to prevent the spread of MRSA?

Facility managers and athletic directors should encourage patrons to wash their hands frequently and wipe down gym equipment after use. However, ultimately, the best defense is prevention, and this is accomplished through more thorough cleaning.

Should we increase cleaning frequencies? Use more disinfectants?

More cleaning is usually not necessary, but more hygienic cleaning is.

Mops, buckets, and cleaning cloths can spread contaminants—including the bacteria that cause MRSA—as they are used. More hygienic cleaning suggests doing away with these old tools for cleaning restrooms, locker rooms, and workout matting and replacing them with a system that does not spread contaminants and tends to be faster to use as well: spray-and-vac (aka) no-touch cleaning. These machines pressure-wash, rinse, and then vacuum up soils and contaminants from surfaces. Some of these machines are even rated "sanitizing devices" based on EPA criteria, even without the use of chemicals, so more disinfectants are not necessary.

Will spray-and-vac or no-touch cleaning protect us from MRSA?

No method will stop every case of MRSA or any other infectious disease from spreading. What this cleaning method will do is help minimize the possibility that anyone using your gym's restrooms and locker rooms will become infected.

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