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ONE OPTION FOR KEEPING YOUR INDOOR FACILITY CLEAN

Kyle Frey, a 21-year-old junior from Drexel University in Philadelphia, was one of his school's star wrestlers when he noticed a small lesion, much like a pimple, on his arm. Frey, who worked out with his team on an almost daily basis, thought little of it at the time.

A few days later, however, following a match, Frey noticed the "pimple" had grown considerably and was beginning to hurt. By the next morning, the pimple was as large as a golf ball and very painful.

Frey's trainer rushed him to the emergency room, where Frey learned he had methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), a potentially deadly infection that usually requires treatment with several antibiotics in very large quantities. Frey was released after a 5-day hospital stay, healthy but curious about where he acquired the disease. His doctors believed he might have caught it from another wrestler—someone who had the disease and wasn't aware of it—or, more likely, he caught it from a contaminated wrestling mat and/or gym equipment, or even from surfaces such as benches in the locker room.

This is happening in exercise facilities, gyms, and fitness centers across the country; in fact, MRSA infections are now a risk literally anywhere people go to exercise and stay in shape.

Most who frequent the gym have avoided the kind of dramatic, life-threatening experience that befell Kyle Frey. However, according to a position paper just released by the National Athletic Trainers Association (NATA), “Skin infections, along with other infectious diseases, are extremely common” among people who use gym facilities. In fact, the paper goes on to say, skin infections lead to more than half of all the outbreaks of infectious diseases among participants in competitive sports.

“Prevention is key to minimizing the problem and, in all fairness, gym and locker room users, young and old, can also do a lot themselves to stay healthy,” says John Richter, technical director for Kaivac, developers of the No-Touch Cleaning system.

Richter has several suggestions for facility managers that can help keep facilities and those who use them healthy:

- Managers should communicate with facility users regarding the problem. The more people are aware infections can be transmitted in gym and locker room settings, the more careful and cautious they are likely to be.
- Facility users should follow proper hand hygiene. Gym users should either wash their hands after using gym equipment or use disinfectant wipes, which many gyms are now providing to their users. Gym equipment can be a breeding ground for serious infections.
- Visitors should always shower after exercising. Women tend not to shower after exercise, while men are more likely to do so. However, showering with antibacterial soap can wash away germs and bacteria before they have the opportunity to develop into a disease or infection.

- Users should avoid sharing personal items such as razors, towels, or soaps. Sharing of such items can lead to the spread of infectious illnesses.
- Managers should make sure soap dispensers are kept clean. Consider using soap dispensers refilled with soap cartridges rather than systems that have soap poured into them; studies report that these types of dispensers are healthier and more sanitary.
- Visitors should bring two sets of clothes. Gym clothes should be worn only at the gym and washed after each workout; street clothes should be worn after taking a shower. This limits the possibility that germs and bacteria that may have gathered on gym clothes are transmitted to the wearer or others.

As mentioned earlier, exercise equipment can become contaminated during the course of the day. Yet in the past, most gyms were cleaned only at the end of the day, just like other types of facilities.

“However, this has not proven adequate in gyms because of the way they are used and the number of people coming and going, using the facilities,” notes Richter.

Instead of cleaning only at the end of the day, many private gyms now prefer a method best described as “continuous cleaning.” Continuous cleaning means that sanitation professionals frequently mop floors; wipe down machines, mats, mirrors, sinks, counters, and restroom fixtures; and perform other cleaning tasks throughout the day while the facility is open and in use.

“This type of cleaning can sometimes prove disruptive in an office-type situation but surprisingly, it can work very well in a gym or exercise-type facility,” Richter says.

However, more extensive cleaning, what Richter refers to as “hygienic cleaning,” is required in shower and locker room areas.

“This may also mean rethinking the way locker rooms have been cleaned for decades and adopting new methods, products, and technologies,” he says. “We are dealing with public health threats that simply were not much of an issue a decade ago, but which now call for [the use of] new and more effective tools and systems.”

His suggestions for hygienic cleaning include:

- Using EPA-registered disinfectants designed to kill a broad spectrum of germs and bacteria.
- Using microfiber cleaning cloths and mop heads, which have proven to be much more effective at cleaning floors and surfaces. Color-coded microfiber cloths allow users to designate a color for cleaning each type of surface — so, for example, only red cloths would be used to clean toilets, eliminating the risk of cross contamination.
- Using microfiber "smart" towel cloths. These cloths are divided into eight quadrants, allowing users to use a fresh, clean quadrant for each surface they clean. This is another way to reduce the risk of cross contamination.
- Using spray-and-vac cleaning equipment. Even with microfiber cloths — and certainly with conventional cleaning cloths and mop heads — cleaning tools can spread germs and bacteria from one surface to another as they are used. Spray-and-vac systems eliminate this problem. Similar to indoor pressure washers, they effectively remove contaminants from surfaces, which are then vacuumed up or released down floor drains.

Cost questions

As much of the country faces continued financial issues, gyms and other fitness centers may have a drop in membership and revenue. The question arises: Can such facilities afford to adopt continuous cleaning programs or more thorough, hygienic cleaning methods?

Richter says many facilities have faced this challenge by having existing staff members take over many cleaning tasks. As to the hygienic cleaning suggested for locker rooms, “Considerable savings can be realized by switching to spray-and-vac cleaning systems,” he says. “[This is because] studies indicate fixtures, restrooms, and locker rooms can be cleaned in one-third the time using this equipment” (based on studies conducted by worldwide cleaning association ISSA and published in The Official ISSA 554 Cleaning Times, updated October 2009).

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Pay special attention to mats

Wrestling mats, along with mats used for tumbling, aerobics, and other sports/workout activities, are of special concern when it comes to preventing the spread of disease in gym/workout facilities. These mats should be cleaned daily or more often if used frequently throughout the day. Mats that are not affixed to the floor should be rolled up so that the underside of the mat and the floor beneath may be cleaned as well.

Because our goal is to eliminate cross-contamination, an EPA-registered disinfectant should be used to wipe down mats. A knowledgeable distributor should be able to help gym owners/managers select the best disinfectants for their particular needs.

It is important to note that disinfecting is typically a two-step process. Clean the mat first, using an all-purpose type cleaner, to remove debris, stains, etc. Then, once the mat is clean and dry, disinfect using an EPA-approved product.

Always use the disinfectant exactly as instructed. This includes dilution as well as the “dwell” time noted on the label. Most disinfectants must dwell on a surface for several minutes in order to be effective. Further, if using terry cloth or microfiber cleaning cloths make sure they are clean and change them frequently. Recent studies indicate that as the cloth becomes soiled, it can spread as many or more contaminants than it collects, defeating the entire disinfecting process.

Another option is to use a no-touch or spray-and-vac machine to clean the mats. First, the machine applies chemicals to the mat. Then, after proper dwell time, the area is rinsed by the machine and the built-in wet vac can be used to speed up drying. This process tends to be much faster than cleaning through manual practices. Further, some no-touch systems, using just water, are now recognized as “sanitation devices” per EPA criteria. This is a much “greener” way to clean sports mats as well as a chemical cost savings.

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