

The Facts About MRSA

Kerry Shearer: There has been a lot of discussion in the news lately about MRSA, but what is MSRA and how concerned should you be?

Doctor Karen Tait is Sacramento County's Deputy Public Health Officer and she's here to help you put it into perspective and tell you what you can do to prevent infection.

Karen Tait, MD: MRSA is not a super bug. It is a bacteria that has developed resistance to one class of antibiotics. That happens frequently in the medical world. It does limit the choice of antibiotics for that particular kind of infection, but we have other treatment options and it doesn't make it any worse a bacteria than it was before it developed that resistance.

Kerry Shearer: Dr. Tait, how common is MRSA?

Karen Tait, MD: Approximately 25-30% of the population carries staph aureus on the skin or sometimes in the nose at any given time. A smaller percentage maybe 1% of the population will carry MRSA.

When the skin is simply colonized with the bacteria, there are no outward signs of any kind of problem. This is just normal flora, we call it, the bacteria that live on the skin surface.

Only occasionally will it penetrate the skin surface and actually cause visible signs of infection.

A parent should just be vigilant for skin infections and take prompt action to assure any skin infection gets treated. They don't need to be panicked about this or excessively concerned.

This is just one more of the many health conditions that are managed through good personal hygiene practices which we do encourage. And prompt medical attention to any kind of condition that does appear to be getting worse.

Here in Sacramento, the cases of MRSA that we have experience have been of a minor nature. They have been cases that have been able to be treated at home and have not required hospitalization.

The treatment for MRSA is with antibiotics. It's resistant to certain antibiotics, the penicillin-like antibiotics, but that leaves us other options for treatment and so the doctor will just choose different antibiotics.

The bacteria resides on skin surfaces so the easiest way to spread it is through direct contact, skin of one person contacting the skin of another person. It can also be spread through the common use of personal items such as towels, and occasionally it could be contracted by contacting a surface where the bacteria has been deposited on an environmental surface.

Kerry Shearer: Why are we hearing about so many new cases of MRSA?

Karen Tait, MD: The news has been providing a lot of coverage about MRSA and I believe it stems from the fact there have been some occasional severe cases of illness related to this infection and that does rarely occur.

In addition in the past we normally have not heard in the news cases of pimples or boils that are very common results of staph infections.

Now doctors are testing for staph more frequently to look for it and we are hearing about each case as it occurs, which creates an appearance of much more frequent a problem and a more severe problem than we actually have.

Kerry Shearer: Well tell us, what are the steps that people can take to prevent getting MRSA? At school or work or wherever they may be?

Karen Tait, MD: People should wash their hands regularly. They should avoid sharing personal items such as towels. If they do have a wound, they should cover it. Keep it away from others.

If a person thinks they have an infection in the skin and they can see redness or perhaps drainage or swelling or experience pain, they should see a doctor.

It's much easier to have an infection evaluated by a doctor and treated and it's best to do that early to prevent anything from progressing to a more serious condition.

It's not necessary to keep a child home from school if they have a wound that might be infected but can be covered and kept away from contact with others.

Kerry Shearer: How necessary is it to scrub down the surfaces at school or at the office?

Karen Tait, MD: To prevent spreading the infection through environmental surfaces, it's a good idea to have a regular program of environmental cleaning, but that can be done just with routine housekeeping measures, using standard disinfectant solutions on a regular basis.

There is no need to go to excessive lengths of environmental decontamination or an attempt at sterilization of the environment. That's just not practical nor is it necessary.

Kerry Shearer: Dr. Tait's advice was reinforced by California Department of Public Health Epidemiologist Gil Chavez speaking at a news conference held at Sutter Middle School in Sacramento.

Gil Chavez, MD: I think the greatest misunderstanding about MRSA is that it is a "super bug". That when you get it that it is really going to create a big problem for everyone. As I said, MRSA in most cases is mild and is treatable.

Even in the cases where there is a staph infection due to antibiotic resistance strain, those cases are very treatable if they are intervened early and they result very successfully. So I think that it is very rare that MRSA leads to more complications. For the most part they are minor infections that are treatable.

Kerry Shearer: More information on MRSA is available on the Sacramento County Public Health website.

You can also find out more about our many programs to promote the health and well being of all Sacramento County communities. The address is www.SCPH.com.

I am Kerry Shearer. Stay healthy and thanks for watching.