



'Superbug' MRSA Worries Doctors, Athletes

Drug-Resistant Germ Found in Locker Rooms; Can Kill Within Days

Jan. 13, 2005 --

Ricky Lannetti was once the picture of health -- a big, strong college football player.

In the fall of 2003, he had led his team to a big victory, catching more passes than anyone and securing a spot in the national semifinals. But sometime after that game he caught something else.

"They didn't know what they had. They were as confused as I was," his mother, Teresa, told ABC News. "They had five different antibiotics in him, but they finally said, 'We can't handle it.'" On Dec. 6, 2003, one week after his last game, Lannetti died.

There's still a lot of mystery surrounding how Lannetti, 21, got sick in the first place and why his illness progressed so quickly. But one thing is clear: He had an infection caused by a bacteria generally found on the skin or in the nose, called MRSA, or methycillin resistant staphylococcus aureus.

MRSA is the kind of germ doctors have worried about for years: some call it a "superbug," a germ the usual antibiotics won't kill.

Worse, it can cause trouble quickly. What starts as a skin infection can become a deadly pneumonia or blood or bone infection in a matter of days if not treated correctly.

Delicate Choices

Up until recently, doctors hadn't seen MRSA in healthy young people outside the hospital, said Dr. Robert Daum of University of Chicago Hospitals. "MRSA is a denizen of the hospital," he said. "It lives here."

But now, 65 percent of the staphylococcus infections coming into his emergency room in otherwise healthy kids are MRSA, he said. To him, that rate of growth is alarmingly fast -- a cause for concern.

MRSA is resistant to anywhere from 15 to 30 different antibiotics. That means when it's detected, a doctor has only a very small number of compounds at hand that are able to kill it.

Daum said he has seen some patients with MRSA that are worse off for having seen a doctor that could not recognize it. The patients were treated with regular antibiotics -- and that gave the germ more time to do damage in the body.

"We've seen a lot of kids that come in here that needed intensive care and in fact have died that have started off by being out in the community, where they get an old treatment and then come in here having failed it," he said.

Evolving Quickly

Most MRSA infections begin with a cut or a bruise, which is why some of the worst outbreaks have happened to football teams.

"I think you'd be hard-pressed right now to find a college athletic department that has not seen it in some shape or form with some of their athletes," said Ron Courson, the athletic trainer for the University of Georgia football team. Eight players on his team had MRSA infections this season.

A communal locker room, with many people in one area, can help bacteria spread, he said. "You may have athletes sharing equipment such as passing a towel from one person to the next person on the sideline."

Even the NFL has had its share of problems: players such as Kenyatta Walker of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Junior Seau and Charles Rodgers of the Miami Dolphins reportedly have been hospitalized with serious MRSA infections.

Daum's biggest concern is that as MRSA continues to evolve, it will become resistant to even more antibiotics.

"Bacteria are unlike us humans. We have a generation time of about 25 years. They have a generation time of 20 minutes," he said. "They can adapt pretty fast."

Daum said he is seeing a strain in the Midwest that is so severe, it has caused deaths even when the right antibiotic is used.

Staying Germ-Free

This week, Courson and his fellow athletic trainers held a workshop to discuss ways to keep their own locker rooms as germ-free as possible. Some of their recommendations:

- Don't share towels or wipe your face with a towel you use on equipment.
- Don't ignore skin infections that won't heal.

- Shower after a workout.

- Use liquid soap, not bars.

- Wash your hands -- well. To kill germs you must wash under nails and rub thoroughly for 20-30 seconds