

**Communicable Disease Epidemiology  
and Immunization Section**

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To King County School Nurses and Administrators,

In response to growing public awareness of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), Public Health is providing information and resources that should be useful to school officials in responding to questions and concerns from students, families, and staff.

*Staphylococcus aureus*, often referred to simply as "staph," is a type of bacteria commonly carried on the skin or in the nose of healthy people. Staph bacteria are one of the most common causes of skin infections. MRSA refers to types of staph that are resistant to an antibiotic called methicillin. This means that infections with the bacteria do not respond to some of the antibiotics that are commonly used against staph infections. While 25% to 30% of the population is colonized with staph (meaning that bacteria are present, but not causing an infection or symptoms), approximately 1% is colonized with MRSA. In some areas of the country, MRSA is the most common cause of skin and soft tissue infections seen in emergency departments. MRSA is transmitted most frequently by direct skin-to-skin contact or contact with shared items or surfaces that have come into contact with someone else's infection (e.g., towels, athletic equipment, used bandages).

Though MRSA is an important health problem facing our community, the news media's recent focus on the most dramatic cases of MRSA does not accurately reflect the spectrum of illness from the bacteria. Most illnesses caused by MRSA are treatable skin infections that heal with proper wound care, sometimes without requiring antibiotics. Although MRSA can cause severe infections among previously healthy people in the community, this is relatively rare. It is also uncommon for severe infections to spread to others if appropriate precautions are taken. Even in severe cases, most patients respond to commonly available antibiotics.

Our recommendations to schools regarding MRSA are to:

- Report outbreaks (person-to-person transmission) involving students and staff (including teams, clubs, or extracurricular groups) to Public Health at (206) 296-4774. Individual cases of MRSA do not need to be reported.
- Have students and staff with skin or soft tissue infections see their health care providers promptly for evaluation and treatment.
- Have students with MRSA skin infections keep infected areas of skin covered at all times. Covering wounds greatly reduces the risk of infecting others or contaminating surfaces.
- Exclude from sports (or other activities involving physical contact) any student who has an open infected wound that cannot be kept securely covered until it is healed.
- Exclude from child care or preschool any child with a bacterial skin infection until that infection has been evaluated and treated with antibiotics for at least 24 hours.
- Promote frequent hand washing and good personal hygiene.
- Regularly clean and disinfect equipment that has frequent skin contact (such as athletic equipment) and do not allow sharing of towels and other personal equipment. Particular attention should be paid to surfaces that are likely to come into contact with uncovered or poorly covered infections.
- Use detergent-based cleaners or Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)-registered disinfectants that are effective at removing MRSA from the environment.

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Usually, it should not be necessary to inform the entire school community about individual, unrelated MRSA infections. When MRSA infections occur within the school population, school health professionals should determine, based on their medical judgment, whether some or all students, parents and staff should be notified. Consultation with the Public Health should be used to guide this decision.

Finally, the decision to close a school for any communicable disease should be made by school officials in consultation Public Health. In most cases it is not necessary to close schools because of MRSA infections in students and for this reason Public Health does not recommend school closure as a control measure for MRSA. It is important to note that MRSA transmission can be prevented by simple measures such as hand hygiene and covering infections.

Enclosed is a list of resources on MRSA, as well as our MRSA fact sheet. If you have questions or concerns on MRSA or other communicable diseases of public health importance, please call (206) 296-4774.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tao Sheng Kwan-Gett MD MPH".

Tao Sheng Kwan-Gett, MD MPH  
Medical Epidemiologist

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeffrey S. Duchin MD".

Jeffrey S. Duchin, MD  
Chief, Communicable Disease Epidemiology & Immunization Section