

“Flesh-eating” bacteria rare, important to know the signs

By John Brooks, GLWACH Marketing Specialist and Public Affairs Officer

While flesh-eating bacteria, or necrotizing fasciitis, sounds like something from science fiction, it is a real condition, although uncommon.

“Necrotizing Fasciitis is a rare, but...often fatal condition. When it occurs it tends to be a big news maker,” said Dr. Jon Moore, General Leonard Wood Army Community Hospital dermatology physician’s assistant. “But it is a surgical emergency when it occurs,” he said.

Initial symptoms of the bacteria are out of proportion to a normal skin injury, such as increased pain, that continues to increase at or near the injury, and flu-like symptoms within 24 hours.

Within three to four days the area swells and a purplish rash with dark fluid-filled blisters appear. In four to six days after the injury, shock, long-term disability and death may occur if left untreated or if treatment is delayed, said Col. David Hause, GLWACH chief of pathology.

“Flesh-eating bacteria aren’t some individual super bug,” Hause said, “but are a mixture, in many cases, starting with common Streptococcus and Staphylococcus species.”

“Staph and strep infections are usually the culprit,” Moore added.

“Seek medical attention if all symptoms occur at once. Make a same-day appointment or visit the Emergency Room,” Moore said. “Death and disfigurement can be avoided by early diagnosis.”

Necrotizing fasciitis can’t be prevented, but you can lessen your chances of getting it with simple hand washing. All cuts, no matter how minor, should be washed out with soap and

water. The bacteria enters the body at a minor opening in the skin, such as a cut or abrasion, then works itself into the fat and muscle tissue, officials said.

“NF is usually recognized first by a primary care practitioner or ER doctor. Once recognized, it has to be aggressively treated by a surgeon,” Hause said.

To make a same-day appointment at GLWACH or the Ozark Family-Centered Medical Home, call TriWest at 1.866.299.4234.

For more information about necrotizing fasciitis, visit www.NNFF.org.