

Wrestling with the risk of MRSA

No cases reported thus far, as coaches and athletes focus on prevention

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One day after the ultimate contact sport opened its season, a county middle school teacher died from a drug-resistant staph infection, playing into the already heightened awareness of MRSA among the wrestling community.

Because skin-to-skin contact is the nature of their sport, wrestlers are some of the most susceptible to infectious skin conditions, especially bacterial infections, according to health officials.

Yet Montgomery County Supervisor of Athletics William Beattie has said that since the season began on Dec. 8, none of the county's 800 to 850 public school wrestlers have contracted methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus — the same bacterial infection that took the life of Hoover Middle School teacher Merry King on Dec. 9.

"I know that wrestling's the easiest way to get it, because you're in full contact the whole time with someone else," said Sherwood junior Steven Gamble, a state-caliber wrestler who witnessed the effects of MRSA this past fall when several football teammates contracted it. "So I'm worried about it.

"After practice every time: Go home, shower, clean every part of your body," he said. "Make sure nothing's going to get on you."

Wrestling increases an athlete's exposure to cuts, sores and bodily fluids — all means of transmitting MRSA. Some within the community have expressed concern that the wrestling season could trigger more cases. To date, 49 cases have been reported in Montgomery County Public Schools, according to spokeswoman Kate Harrison.

Only five cases were active as of Dec. 27, and none of those involved a high school athlete, Harrison said.

Coaches and athletic directors countywide agree there is little more to do than the precautions they routinely advise. Because of the increased risks, the wrestling community says it practices greater vigilance.

"This has been an ongoing thing in wrestling for many, many years," said Whitman High Athletics Director Andy Wetzel, formerly the Vikings' wrestling coach. "There are strict guidelines about skin conditions. ...Wrestling coaches are especially on top of it."

Preventing the transmission of MRSA is no different for wrestlers than for anyone else. Athletes are encouraged to shower as soon as possible after matches and practices, and wash equipment — including clothing, headgear and any knee or elbow padding — in hot water. Cuts and abrasions should be covered immediately; personal items such as razors, towels and soap are not to be shared.

School facilities, including locker rooms, practice rooms and the mats, are regularly scoured with bleach solution, a procedure the county established in response to the reported MRSA cases last fall.

The National Federation of State High School Associations — whose rules govern most high school athletics in Maryland and many other states — includes guidelines specific to wrestlers. All athletes are examined for visible signs of infection at pre-match weigh-ins. If there are any suspicious cuts or lesions on their bodies, wrestlers must provide a physician's note before they are allowed to compete.

Beattie discusses these guidelines at a meeting with all county coaches before each season. This year, he issued a one-page memo on combating staph infections, but said he is confident in the measures in place.

The county also has no plans to include specific mention of MRSA in a mandatory participation contract signed by parents and student-athletes that lays out the risks of participating in sports, from injury to ineligibility to infection.

"I do trust the parents," Beattie said. "We do not say specifically anything about staph infections in that contract. It includes a lot of information; there are many potential perils to student-athletes."

Concern over MRSA spiked in October when more than two dozen cases were reported in Montgomery County Public Schools. At the time, many of those cases involved high school athletes, and a Virginia high school football player died in the fall after contracting the bacteria.

Other forms of staph infection — especially impetigo and ringworm — are more common among wrestlers than other athletes, according to health experts.

"It's more prevalent in wrestling because you have skin-on-skin contact," Springbrook team trainer Mark Kang said. "These guys are rubbing up against not only each other, but the floor where other wrestlers have previously wrestled also."

To date, the county wrestling community's vigilance appears to have won out over its susceptibility. But for wrestlers like Gamble — who said he sustains scratches "once or twice a day" in practice — it remains a concern.

“I saw it up close; it just looked painful. ... My friend had it on his back, maybe that far out from his back,” said Gamble, holding a thumb and forefinger about two inches apart. “I usually only think about it when I have an open cut, that I have to get home and get it cleaned. But I have it in the back of my head.

“I can never forget about it.”