



Safety Alert



September 11, 2009

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Subject: Potential MRSA Exposure

Area of Concern: California Fire Incidents

Distribution: All Employees Supporting Fire Incidents

Discussion: There have been a few confirmed cases of MRSA identified through out different fire camps in California. This information is to not create panic, but to create awareness of what MRSA is and how to mitigate it. The most important thing is to stay informed and maintain good hygiene. One case A Line EMT on one of the California incidents had a confirmed case of MRSA. The EMT believed they contracted the infection while attending to a fire fighter in the Medical Unit of the Base Camp. Towards the end of the two week assignment they felt soreness in the nose which progressively got worse on the way back to their home unit they sought medical help and was tested positive for MRSA. The physicians that attended them were concerned that the infection could migrate into the brain. Fortunately, after several days of outpatient antibiotic drips the EMT has recovered.

Safety Concerns to Employees:

Anyone can contract a Staph infection and are most likely to get a Staph infection if they have:

- Skin-to-skin contact with someone who has a Staph infection.
- Contact with items and/or surfaces that have Staph on them.
- Any openings in the skin such as a cut, scrape, or insect sting.
- Crowded living conditions
- Poor hygiene.

Most Staph infections are minor and may be easily treated if diagnosed early. However, Staph may cause more serious conditions such as infections of the bloodstream, surgical sites, or pneumonia. Sometimes a Staph infection that starts as a skin infection may worsen or be diagnosed as MRSA. MRSA is different from other types of Staph because it cannot be treated with certain antibiotics.

Staph is a type of bacteria that may cause skin infections that look like pimples or boils and can easily enter existing skin openings such as cuts, scrapes and insect bites. Skin infections caused by Staph may become red, swollen, or have pus or other drainage and can easily be misdiagnosed at earlier stages of infection. Some Staph (known as Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* or MRSA) are resistant to certain antibiotics, making it harder to treat.

Treatment for a Staph skin infection may include taking an antibiotic or having a doctor drain the infection. If you are given an antibiotic, be sure to take all of the doses, even if the infection is getting better, unless your doctor tells you to stop taking it. Do Not share antibiotics with other people or save them for later use.

Mitigation Measures:

MRSA is now becoming more common in healthy people. These infections can occur among people who are likely to have cuts or wounds and have close contact with one another, such as members of fire crews. This type of MRSA is called community-based methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (CA-MRSA).

MRSA is not to be taken lightly, especially if contracted during a fire assignment. It's critical that all employees take immediate action and seek medical attention and help mitigate the spread of the infection. Fire assignments are the perfect environment for a Staph infection to thrive due to limited hygiene, close living conditions and potential contaminants. **MRSA (STAPH INFECTION) IS PREVENTABLE!**

All employees that will be supporting fire incidents need to be proactive and take preventative measures prior, during, and after assignments. Don't "assume" that someone else will take on that responsibility. Mitigation measures that can be taken include the following:

- Take a small supply kit in your fire gear that has alcohol-based hand sanitizer and sanitizer wipes. Don't always expect all fire camps to provide this for you.
- Be "compulsive" about hand-washing and hand sanitizing during fire assignments. Wash your hands often!
- Do Not touch other people's cuts or bandages without protection (surgical gloves).
- Do Not share personal items like towels, combs, or razors.
- Pay Attention to all wounds (insect bites/stings, poison oak, cuts, scrapes) and treat them as a perfect MRSA entry site. If you notice any redness, swelling, pus or other – seek immediate medical attention.
- Keep all cuts and scrapes clean and covered with a clean bandage.
- Discuss preventative measures at crew safety briefings and pay close attention to the Incident Action Plan components (Safety message, Medical/Medivac Plan) in case you have a medical emergency. ALL employees on an incident need to read and understand the Medical Plan *each* day.
- If there is a suspected or confirmed exposure, take immediate measures for disinfecting all vehicles and equipment.

Regardless of the situation, MRSA is of great concern. MRSA infections are more difficult to treat than ordinary staph infections. For some people, especially those who are weak or ill, these infections can become serious. Additional information about MRSA can be found at the following web sites:

Centers for Disease Control (CDC): <http://www.cdc.gov/>

Web MD:

http://www.webmd.com/search/search_results/default.aspx?query=MRSA%20Staph%20Infection&sourceType=undefined

EPA (MRSA - recommended disinfectants): http://epa.gov/oppad001/list_h_mrsa_vre.pdf
http://fsweb.r5.fs.fed.us/program/safety/corner/MRSA/MRSA_INFO_Postcard.pub

<http://fsweb.r5.fs.fed.us/program/safety/corner/MRSA/MRSAPatientInfoSheet.pdf>

Remember an informed person is a better prepared person...you have the tools, you are all smart, there isn't any reason to fear this latest development.