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Hockey teams fight against MRSA

Wednesday, September 27, 2006

MARK CONSTANTINE
THE SAGINAW NEWS

Saginaw Spirit captain Patrick McNeill's sweaty hands have company in his hockey gloves during practices and games.

A host of bacteria is along for the ride, keeping Spirit trainer Bryan Burnstein and equipment manager Jose Ortiz on their toes trying to prevent those nasty, microscopic critters from causing problems.

The biggest problem the pair tries to prevent is a staph infection, but in recent years a stronger, potentially deadly form of staph -- methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA as it's commonly known -- has charged into the world of athletics, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

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A handful of athletes around the country, including Lycoming College (Williamsport, Pa.) football player Ricky Lannetti, have died from MRSA (pronounced "mer-sa") since the late 1990s when it jumped to the athletic arena, the CDC reports. The Washington Redskins, St. Louis Rams and Miami Dolphins have dealt with cases, USA Today

reported.

The strain of the bug found outside the hospital setting, where it's plagued health-care providers since the 1960s, the CDC notes, is known as community-based MRSA. As the bacteria became more resistant to antibiotics, it spread and now threatens those in communal settings.

Spirit team physician Miles Light knows firsthand about MRSA in hospitals. He said he's making it a priority to learn more about community-based MRSA.

"I had my third back surgery in less than three years in February, and while in the hospital I got MRSA," Light said. "I was on I.V.'s for five months. I got it deep in my back, and it was dreadfully painful. I was hooked up to an I.V. last year in the car during the trip to Guelph, Ontario, when the team was in the playoffs."


Spirit defenseman Scott Fletcher doesn't worry about getting sick or hurt when he drops his gloves to fight. But Light pointed out the Saginaw tough guy increases his chances of picking up MRSA or some other bug.

"When they fight, their knuckles can be abraded (scraped), resulting in an open wound and then they pick up their gloves, skate to the penalty box and put their hands right back into those filthy, hot gloves and can end up with an infection," Light said.

"Whether it's MRSA or other staph, the only precautions I know of are cleanliness and educating players about open sores and blisters and how to take care of them. The first thing is to contact Bryan and make him aware of it."

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