

Avoiding MRSA at the Gym

By Ralph Morris, MD, MPH and Bruce K. Bernard, PhD

A healthy workout in the gym should leave you with a feeling of well-being and nothing worse than a duffle bag full of sweaty clothes. It should not leave you with a MRSA *skin infection*.

What is MRSA?

MRSA, or “Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*,” is a type of *staph* bacteria that is, according to the [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), resistant to common antibiotics. CDC reports that about two in every 100 people carry MRSA on their bodies, with no symptoms of infection.



A MRSA infection may at first be mistaken for a spider bite. It may appear as a bump or infected area on the skin and could be accompanied by a fever. [The CDC website provides photos of MRSA skin infections](#) to help the public identify this potentially serious infection.

Older people and those with compromised immune systems are most vulnerable to MRSA infection. For that reason, healthcare facilities are the most common environment of MRSA transmission. In otherwise healthy people, however, MRSA infections are usually mild and improve after a few days of oral antibiotic treatment *if* the infection is sensitive to the antibiotic. Those infections are called “community-associated MRSA,” and are common in environments in which healthy people interact in close quarters; your gym is just such an environment.

Within the gym, intentional skin-to-skin contact (e.g., during wrestling and martial arts training) and unintentional skin contact between teammates during practice and competition (e. g., volleyball) are documented risk factors for MRSA transmission, according to a 2008 review of MRSA infection in athletes¹. Skin damage during exercise, e.g., mat burns, broken blisters, and other workout related injuries that abrade the skin, represent another common risk factor, particularly if broken skin contacts MRSA-contaminated surfaces.

¹ Cohen, P.R. (2008). “The skin in the gym: a comprehensive review of the cutaneous manifestations of community-acquired methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* infection in athletes,” *Clinics in Dermatology*, 26, 16-26.

Tips for avoiding MRSA infections at the gym:

- ✓ WASH YOUR HANDS - thoroughly with soap and water before and after your workout and after using the bathroom; bar soap should not be shared during MRSA outbreaks; use liquid soap instead
- ✓ SHOWER – promptly after any skin-to-skin contact; use liquid soap
- ✓ OTHER PEOPLE’S OPEN WOUNDS - don’t touch wounds or bandages
- ✓ YOUR OWN OPEN WOUNDS –
 - Cover and protect with clean bandages
 - Avoid using whirlpools, therapy pools and swimming pools
- ✓ DISINFECT EQUIPMENT - wipe down exercise equipment (e.g., wrestling mats and the bench press), before and after use, with disinfecting wipes; use bleach wipes or other [EPA-registered products that are effective against MRSA](#).
- ✓ DON’T SHARE -
 - Razors with others; according to the 2008 review of MRSA transmission in the gym, razors create tiny lacerations, which increase the risk of acquiring MRSA from others
 - Towels with others; if shared towels have not been laundered between uses, they may be contaminated with MRSA
- ✓ AVOID REUSING UNLAUNDERED EXERCISE CLOTHES - use fresh, clean clothes for each workout
- ✓ LAUNDRER - sweaty gym clothes and towels promptly after your workout; if laundering instructions permit, use chlorine bleach

A final tip: Keep up the good work at the gym. In the grand scheme of things, the benefits of working out greatly overshadow the risk of MRSA infection. Why not increase your benefits by following these tips?

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