



Penn-Trafford, Connellsville grapple with 'mat herpes'

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The spread of a herpes virus that causes painful skin lesions has brought high school wrestling to a halt in two area school districts, school officials said Wednesday. Penn-Trafford High School has suspended its wrestling program for two weeks, and Connellsville Area has postponed matches because an unknown number of wrestlers have contracted herpes gladiatorum, commonly known as "mat herpes," school officials said.

The virus, common among athletes who have skin-to-skin contact, causes clusters of blisters or a rash, usually on the face, neck, shoulders and arms, according to Stacy Kriedeman, spokesperson for the state health department. She said lesions may be accompanied by a fever and tingling of the skin.

It is not fatal, but once a person is infected, the virus remains in their body, and there can be recurrences, said Dr. Amesh Adalja, a fellow in the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Division of Infectious Diseases. It is caused by herpes simplex type 1, the same strain of the virus that causes cold sores.

"With all herpes, you can't really eradicate them from your body," he said. "They lie dormant in nerve cell and can reactivate at any time." It is not to be confused with methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA, which can be spread by skin-to-skin contact, but also by touching objects that have the bacteria on them.

The health department is working with four schools in Southwestern Pennsylvania where cases of the virus have been reported, Kriedeman said. She would not identify the other schools. Officials at the Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League, which oversees high school sports, have contacted Penn-Trafford and Connellsville Area but did not know of any other schools where outbreaks of the virus have occurred.

Peggy DiNinno, assistant to the superintendent of the Penn-Trafford School District, said the virus first appeared on her district's radar after it was learned that a number of wrestlers from other districts that participated in a scrimmage at Mt. Pleasant Area had contracted the virus. Soon after, "a couple of our students began to develop symptoms and are now being treated by their physicians," DiNinno said.

Mt. Pleasant wrestling coach Mark Mears said his wrestlers have been checked daily by the district's head trainer and have shown no signs of the virus. Penn-Trafford suspended its program for 14 days, canceling last night's match at Kiski Area and the Dec. 12 match with Indiana, plus Penn-Trafford's scheduled participation in the King of the Mountain Tournament Dec. 14-15 at Central Mountain High School in Mill Hall, Clinton County.

"(Fourteen days) is the incubation period of this particular virus," DiNinno said. Larry Cooper, Penn-Trafford's athletic trainer, said he has notified his school's wrestling opponents about the outbreak. A letter also went home with Penn-Trafford students Wednesday to inform parents of the situation. "It's not a cause for panic or concern," DiNinno said. "We're being proactive and informing people to help them make educated decisions."

Connellsville Area athletic director James Lembo said some members of his school's wrestling team have symptoms of the virus, prompting cancellation of last night's dual meet with Laurel Highlands and Saturday's match with Greensburg Salem. Connellsville also participated in the scrimmage at Mt. Pleasant.

"We don't want it to spread or anything," Lembo said. "The school doctor has been advising us. We're not quite sure how we got it. We're trying to track it." Meanwhile, Tim O'Malley, WPIAL executive director, said: "anytime you have wrestling, you have this possibility. It's all about education and information." Eighty-two of the WPIAL's 138 schools have wrestling, with about 1,800 students participating. Adalja said the rash usually lasts about 7-10 days and can be treated with anti-viral medications such as Valtrex and Famvir.

"We tell people to cover the skin and avoid skin contact with that area during that time," Adalja said. There are some antiviral medications, topical creams which may increase the time of healing." Infected students can attend school, as long as they treat and cover the lesions, Kriedeman said. Herpes gladiatorum caused the suspension of wrestling for eight days in the Minnesota State High School League in February after at least 24 wrestlers reported contracting the virus. A similar outbreak occurred in 1999, affecting 63 wrestlers, several of them from Minnesota's state tournament.

"People are more aware of it after what happened in Minnesota last year, and they're being more proactive," said Kriedeman. "We're providing trainers in school districts with educational materials and encouraging school districts to have better procedures to identify the infections."

Unlike herpes viruses, MRSA is a type of staph infection often spread through direct skin-to-skin contact, or a surface or personal item that has been exposed to the bacteria. The infection is resistant to the antibiotics most often used to treat staph infections, including penicillin and methicillin.

In Westmoreland County, several school districts have reported cases of MRSA: Penn-Trafford, Norwin, Hempfield Area, Monessen and Mt. Pleasant Area. In Fayette County, the infection has been found in Albert Gallatin, Laurel Highlands and Connellsville Area schools.