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FROM : National Wildfire Coordinating Group

REPLY TO : NWCG@nifc.gov

DATE : 08/14/2008

SUBJECT : SAFETY ADVISORY : MRSA Exposure Potential (Staph Infection)

During the last 2 weeks several cases of CA-MRSA, (Community Associated-methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*) have been confirmed with firefighters assigned to wildland fire throughout the Continental United States. CA-MRSA is a bacteria that can cause infections in healthy persons who live in crowded conditions, practice poor hygiene, have skin-to-skin contact with someone that has a staph infection, or have open cuts and scrapes.

What is MRSA

MRSA is a type of staph that is resistant to many common antibiotics. While 25% to 30% of the population is colonized with staph, approximately 1% is colonized with MRSA. CA-MRSA infections are acquired by persons who **have not** been recently hospitalized, or had a medical procedure in the last year. Persons who are “colonized” may or may not present symptoms. If left untreated, MRSA could be fatal.

What does a staph or MRSA infection look like?

Staph bacteria, including MRSA, can cause skin infections that may look like a pimple or boil and can be red, swollen, painful, or have pus or other drainage.

How can you prevent staph or MRSA skin infections?

Wash your hands - The simplest thing to do to help stop the spread of MRSA is to wash your hands. When washing hands, do it for at least 10 to 15 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizing gel.

Treat cuts, scrapes, and abrasions immediately - Look for wound treatments that kill MRSA. Ask your Medical Unit whether it has a wound care gel or ointment that kills MRSA. Also, keep wounds covered with a bandage until healed.

Shower after physical activity - Bacteria grow best in warm, moist environments such as those created after physical activity.

Properly clean tools, gear, and equipment - Take time to clean tools and equipment that can accumulate MRSA. Situations where workers share tools and gear may be ripe for the spread of infection-causing bacteria.

Avoid contact with other people's wounds or bandages - Bacteria can live on wounds and bandages and can easily spread. Never touch another person's wound without proper personal protective equipment such as surgical gloves.

Avoid sharing personal items such as towels or razors

There are many valid reasons for practicing good hygiene during fire assignments, MRSA infections are just one of them. Do your part to limit the spread of unwanted disease and infections.
