

Individual staph cases not tracked in Ohio

Drug-resistant form a growing problem

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Ohio is among many states that have not kept track of serious infections and deaths caused by a killer bug that doctors say is on the rise.

A study published yesterday in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* estimates that the drug-resistant staph bacteria kill 19,000 Americans each year, more than die of AIDS.

Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, known as MRSA, was first seen primarily in hospitals. Now, the stubborn and potentially lethal bacteria strike in numerous settings, from locker rooms and prisons to tattoo parlors and family bathrooms.

The infection easily can spread through casual contact or from clothing, towels and sports equipment.

"It's a national epidemic," said Dr. Julie Mangino, an infectious-diseases specialist at the Ohio State University Medical Center. "There's no way Columbus is immune."

Dr. William Schaffner, one of the study's authors, said MRSA "is a major public-health problem." Schaffner is a professor of infectious diseases at Vanderbilt's school of Preventative Medicine in Knoxville, Tenn.

"It appears to many of us to be gathering steam," he said.

Ohio requires that doctors and health officials report multi-person outbreaks of MRSA, but not individual cases. That can make it tough for state officials to determine the scope of the problem.

The state of Tennessee, where Schaffner tracked infections, requires reporting of all cases in which MRSA was found in the bloodstream or in organs of patients. The law does not require reporting of the more numerous cases in which the patient suffered from skin infections only.

He thinks most states soon will reconsider and beef up their reporting requirements. "If a health department wants to track a problem and intervene, reporting is the traditional way to go," Schaffner said. "Without the numbers, you can't go to the legislature and ask for money to combat the problem."

Minnesota originally required tracking at six hospitals in Minneapolis and St. Paul and another six spread over the state. The numbers confirmed a growing problem: Known cases went from 1,100 in 2000 to 3,600 in 2006, said Richard Danila, deputy state epidemiologist at the Minnesota Department of Health.

To get a better handle, the state now requires all hospitals to report serious cases and deaths caused by MRSA.

Alicia Cole, a former Columbus resident, nearly died last year in a California hospital after she developed a drug-resistant staph infection that raged until it turned into necrotizing fasciitis, or flesh-eating bacteria.

Cole now advocates nationally for better awareness and reporting, including requiring hospitals to make public their infection and death rates. "We have to start talking about how to protect yourself while you're in the hospital," she said yesterday.

After a routine surgery to remove benign fibroid growths from her uterus, Cole apparently developed an infection. But it wasn't properly diagnosed, she said, until she was desperately ill and the bacteria had begun to destroy her flesh.

"There was a black dot on my stomach just above the incision," she said. "In an hour and a half, that black dot was a quarter-sized pustule."

Teresa Long, health commissioner for Columbus Public Health, said that MRSA is one of a growing number of drug-resistant bacteria that will challenge the health system.

"This is part of a new reality, learning how to understand and prevent the spread of these kinds of infections."

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Staph infections

Ohio does not require reporting of individual staph infection cases, only outbreaks of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*. Statewide figures for 2002 through Oct. 1:

	SETTING	CASES
2002	Corrections	58
	Health care	12
	Total	70
2003	Corrections	133
	Family	11
	Total	144
2004	Corrections	4
	Illegal tattooing	18
	Sports team	17
	Total	39
2005	Corrections	19
	Family	10
	Illegal tattooing	22
	Sports team	17
	Workplace	3
	Total	71
2006	Corrections	14
	Family	5
	Health care	19
	Sports team	97
	Total	135
2007*	Corrections	55
	Group home	7
	Health care	5
	Sports team	10
	Workplace	8
	Total	85

* year to date

Source: Ohio Department of Health

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