

MRSA Outbreaks Highlight Importance of Green Cleaning in Schools *Cleaning for Health Also Offers Benefits for Environment*

Several highly-publicized recent outbreaks of Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) in schools have ignited a rush for systems and products that will protect children from this “superbug” infection. As school cleaning supply companies are flooded with orders for huge quantities of harsh disinfectants, it is important to remember that basic hygiene and green cleaning practices designed to protect health without harming the environment remain the most effective — and least dangerous — way to prevent the spread of MRSA.

“MRSA outbreaks show how absolutely important it is for schools to clean consistently with health as a priority which, when coupled with reducing the environmental impact, is essentially the definition of green cleaning,” said Claris Olson, environmental health specialist for the Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC). “Extreme measures may actually backfire when you’re addressing this type of infection. The good news is that schools can protect children with basic steps such as hand washing and a thorough, consistent cleaning program.”

Green cleaning procedures, such as those outlined in HSC’s Quick & Easy Guide to Green Cleaning in Schools and echoed in the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s guidelines for controlling MRSA in schools, suggest thorough cleaning of a school and disinfecting touch points such as doorknobs and light switches. Extra attention should be paid to locker rooms and athletic areas. For a disinfectant to be effective, it needs to be used on surfaces that have already been cleaned to remove surface soil that can harbor bacteria.

This cleaning procedure prevents the spread of infection without exposing children to unnecessary levels of harsh chemicals that can reduce indoor air quality, burden the immune system and aggravate respiratory problems such as asthma.

Excessive use of disinfectants is also suspected as a contributor to the development of resistant strains of bacteria similar to the way that overuse of antibiotics led to the development of MRSA.

Green cleaning procedures for disinfection offer benefits for the environment and reduce expenses for schools by avoiding futile attempts to disinfect an entire school. Of course, they also protect the health of students and staff by focusing the disinfection on surfaces where cross contamination can occur.

MRSA is transferred through skin contact with the bacteria, either directly from one individual to another or on shared surfaces such as doorknobs, tables or towels. MRSA usually enters the body through a cut on the skin and causes mild skin infections such as pimples and boils. These infections can be easily treated by a health professional, often without the use of antibiotics. (If necessary, certain antibiotics to which MRSA is not resistant may be used.) MRSA can also cause more serious infections of the bloodstream or lungs, but these infections are extremely rare in healthy people.

HSC’s guidelines for green cleaning — defined as cleaning to protect health without harming the environment — offer a safe, effective approach for preventing MRSA that is consistent with the recommendations of major health organizations such as the CDC and EPA. In preventing MRSA, schools should:

Educate students, teachers, coaches and all school staff about the importance of hygiene and frequent, thorough hand-washing. Make sure that students and school employees have access to appropriate hand-washing facilities as well as time for hand washing.

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Be sure that any skin infections or open wounds are appropriately cleaned and covered with dry bandages at all times. Consult with the school nurse or other medical professional for specific guidance on caring for skin infections and wounds.

Clean buildings thoroughly and regularly, then disinfect touch points where harmful bacteria – including MRSA – may be transferred. Cleaning with environmentally preferable products further protects children’s health by reducing dangerous chemical exposures.

Use disinfectants registered by the EPA for addressing MRSA, and be sure that cleaning procedures and work flow allow the disinfectant to stay on surfaces for the full amount of time recommended by the product instructions. (Leaving the product on a surface for longer than recommended does not increase its effectiveness but can lead to dangerous and unnecessary chemical exposures. Leaving it on for less time than recommended can inhibit its effectiveness.) Remember that disinfectants and other chemicals are registered by the EPA for a variety of uses and not all of them are appropriate for addressing MRSA. The EPA requires that all disinfectants be registered; this registration should not imply a sense of safety. An official list of EPA registered disinfectants appropriate for preventing the spread of MRSA is available for download at http://epa.gov/oppad001/list_h_mrsa_vre.pdf.

Since MRSA outbreaks have hit the news, school leaders report that they have been approached by vendors offering an array of “miracle” products to protect students from MRSA. In reality, schools can prevent and address MRSA with simple hygiene and cleaning procedures that protect the health of everyone in the building.

“MRSA is a serious threat, but one that schools can address with common sense best practices,” Olson said. “School leaders need to think carefully about their response to the threat and not succumb to panic – any product that targets a mass disinfection or magic cure should be viewed with skepticism. This is a teachable moment that highlights the importance of setting up a program for consistent, environmentally sound cleaning for health.”

The Healthy Schools Campaign, an independent not-for-profit organization, is the leading authority on healthy school environments and a voice for people who care about our environment, our children, and education. Our mission is to advocate for policies and practices that allow all students, teachers and staff to learn and work in a healthy school environment.