

Staph infection emerging as serious surfer ailment



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Last week I presented some information on an ear problem that many surfers have commonly called "surfer's ear" – something that has come into my life many times.

It frequently takes surgery to take care of this problem, and I have had it done five times. The doctor who finally got mine under control is Dr. Carol Jackson of Newport Beach.

I asked her to write about it for my column, and last week she shared her thoughts on this problem. This week I am continuing with what she wrote for me, this time about staph infections that are turning up more and more among surfers everywhere, but especially those here in the Orange County area.

Here is what she has to say.

"A new development in the past year has been the rise in a certain potentially serious staph. ... MRSA, for methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, is on the rise in the community, and possibly in the Southern California surf, especially off Huntington Beach. When recognized and treated early, it's not serious.

"The problem is that it is resistant to most antibiotics, with a couple of oral (pill) exceptions (sulfa-trimethoprim and sometimes rifampin and/or clindamycin). It can require IV treatment by potentially toxic antibiotics including vancomycin and some other newer, more experimental drugs. It can spread to other organ systems and lead to septic (infectious) shock, stroke and loss of cardiac, kidney and other functions.

"Perhaps you're familiar with the case of Timmy Turner, which was in *Surfer* magazine. His story and some video of him are on the Web. He was treated at Hoag. It's still unclear, and there's little firm data on it, but it looks like soft tissue wounds and fresh tattoos in ocean waters can be a source of entry for getting the infection.

"There's a scientist at UCI who has been gathering data, and I've known two other surfers with it – one after exostoses removal. Unfortunately the waters are monitored for fecal contaminants (coliforms) but not tested for staph.

"There is a carrier state in which a person has this staph in their nasal and/or sinus passages, which can flare up. Soooooo, now before surgery I take a nasal swab for culture and sensitivity studies.

"If it's positive, it's straightforward to get rid of with Bactroban cream applied inside the nose for 10 days, and/or by 10 days of oral antibiotics to which the culture shows sensitivity.

"My own thought is that some surfers have acquired it, and due to good general health either don't have much or ... are carriers with no symptoms.

"A word of caution to Southern California surfers: Don't ignore severe headaches even if they clear up, and fevers even if they're under 100 degrees F, nausea, loss of energy or drainage from the nose or ear that has a foul odor, or color such as yellow, brown or green!

"Get checked by nasal culture and CAT scans. For soft tissue lesions that enlarge, become red and sore like boils, it could be MRSA. Get them checked and cultured. Play it safe and stay out of the surf if you have any sores, cuts, lesions, fresh tattoos or recent surgical incisions."

Wow, that scares me. Especially after what happened to Timmy Turner. Timmy is one of our best young surfers here in Orange County, and he almost died from this very kind of thing.

It was touch and go for a long time, and it had everybody who knows him saying prayers and holding their breath.

This is not something to take lightly or joke about. It is becoming a serious concern for all of us who surf on a daily basis as well as for everyone who enters the ocean along our shores.

Don't mess around with this. If you get any kind of symptoms, get help as fast as possible.