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MRSA in the prison system

Contagious Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* seen behind bars

By Andrea Gusty, CBS 11 News Reporter

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Is there an outbreak of the contagious Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) infection in the Alaska correctional system?

That is the question many are trying to answer.

After a *No Confidence* vote, a Legislative audit and a heated debate, CBS 11 News went inside the state's prison system for a rare glimpse of what is at the heart of this controversy.



We've all heard about MRSA, but what exactly is it?

On Thursday, the Anchorage Correctional Complex opened up their doors to show us exactly what is going on behind jail walls. What they told us may surprise you.

Over the last few months, there have been allegations of an outbreak of the drug-resistant Staph. infection MRSA within the state



corrections system. But health officials say it's not an outbreak at all.

"People have gotten skin lesions and boils from Staph. for eons. Probably before recorded history. They are a common thing. It just so happens now there is a strain that is circulating frequently, and it is a MRSA strain," said Dr. Beth Funk, Epidemiologist for the Alaska Public Health Department.

State public health does not track MRSA. And the Department of Corrections has only recently started to keep a tally of who has it. At last count, they say there were 14 cases among Alaskan inmates. At the Anchorage Correctional Complex, health officials say they keep a close eye on the infection.

"Right this minute, there are four. Last week there were six. Some weeks there's none. But usually, six is a big number for here," said Dr. Rebecca Bingham, Clinical Director of the Department of Corrections.

MRSA is drug-resistant, but it can be treated.

"It doesn't make more people sicker. It just has a particular quirk to it that certain antibiotics don't work. So you just have to change your strategy," said Dr. Funk.

As for reports that at least one inmate has died from MRSA, officials say they are nothing more than rumor.

"I've been here five and a half years, and nobody has died from MRSA in the hospital. A few people have died with MRSA a couple of times. But it was people who were already terminally ill," said Dr. Bingham.



But a death certificate of a Spring Creek inmate suggests otherwise. Listed under *causes of death* is MRSA.

Now, everyone is trying to figure out just how big a problem the puss-filled boils are and if they pose a serious health threat behind bars.

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Lawmakers have gotten involved. In fact, the Legislative Budget and Audit Committee has decided to look into the overcrowding issue in Alaska's jails. But MRSA may be too big to tackle. As for the Anchorage Correctional Complex, officials say it is a problem, but it is manageable.

To contact Andrea, call 907-273-3186.

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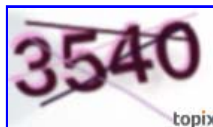
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The banner features a close-up of a person's eyes wearing glasses. Text includes 'Taking a Closer Look at What Matters to You', 'I-Team Investigative Reports', 'Headlines', and 'Mondays at 10pm'. The CBS 11 News logo is on the right.