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(HEA, POL: First part of series on MRSA.)

FOR AIR MONDAY ME AND ATC

NOTE WARNING IN LEAD FOR SENSITIVE PEOPLE

Public health workers are worried about a new kind of infection called M-R-S-A. It's spreading throughout the world and is infecting everyone ... from inmates to pro football players.

KPCC's John Rabe has a series of reports on MRSA for us this week. Here's the first installment, which includes a few descriptions that might make you flinch.

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SCRIPT:

Doctor Elizabeth Bancroft, an epidemiologist for LA County public health, remembers when she first heard of MRSA.

Elizabeth Bancroft 28/2:06: It was in 2002, and our first outbreak of this particular bug was actually in a hospital newborn nursery ... and then there were reports of skin infections due to MRSA in the jail, and then later that year in college athletes, and then also in men who have sex with men. And then when we got the laboratory data together we realized it was all the same strain. :17

Now they realize it can hit anyone. John is a forty-year old gay man who lives in Hollywood and works in publishing. He got an MRSA boil on his rear end two years ago, and still remembers exactly how it felt.

John 22/1:52: It's got a very distinct feeling. It's a pinpoint pressure almost like an ingrown hair. I was surprised, the first one I had, that I couldn't see on the backside, was not visible to the doctor because it seemed like it should have been a big old red bullseye. :12

... because it hurt like crazy. To treat it, John's doctor lanced the boil and gave him antibiotics.

MRSA is transmitted surface-to-surface, and luckily, likes to stay in the skin, although there are invasive cases: into the lungs, the bloodstream, or a heart valve, for example. MRSA is generally not especially dangerous, but that said, it killed four kids in 1999, and researchers are looking into its connections with toxic shock syndrome and flesh-eating bacteria.

M-R-S-A. The A stands for "aureus," Latin for "gold," the bacteria's color. The "S" stands for Staphylococcus, better known as staph, a ubiquitous but often harmless bacteria.

Loren Miller 1/7:33: If you've ever popped a little something on your skin and pus came out, the odds are heavy, 90-plus percent, that that was staph that you had.
:08

Doctor Loren Miller sees patients and does research at Harbor UCLA hospital.

Loren Miller 1/9:12: Some staph may be more likely just to hang around and live on surfaces and on people and not cause problems, and others are likely to cause infections and cause diseases. ... And some staph cause some types of disease and some staph cause other types. :15

Miller says he first heard of MRSA in the late 1990s, when it showed up in a group of Native Americans. Now, he says, a couple people a day come in to his hospital with new cases of MRSA. Miller says there have probably been tens of thousands of cases in LA County so far ... from students at a cosmetology school in Long Beach to the USC football team.

Back to our alphabet soup. The overuse and misuse of antibiotics has led to strains of staph that survive the drugs that used to kill them. The "M-R" in MRSA stands for "methicillin-resistant," for the first drug found to be useless against this strain of staph. To make matters worse, MRSA's in different regions of the world are resistant to different antibiotics. For example, Miller says Cipro, which works in other areas of the country, is 80% resistant

in LA County.

Loren Miller 1/3:59: Since our most commonly used antibiotics don't work against this MRSA, what do we use? And there are no clear answers. We were pulling antibiotics out that were never intended to treat staph that work okay in the test tube but on people we're not sure if these are particularly good drugs or not. And there's no experience in the medical literature; it's just anecdotes from somebody in Chicago or someone in San Francisco, or Houston who says they've had good luck with these antibiotics. :20

Tomorrow, as our series on MRSA continues, we'll hear more of John from Hollywood's story ... he's actually had MSRA four times.

John 22/1:25: The first time was on my rear end. The second time was on the front side. The third time was on my wrist, right there. And most recently on my jaw.

And Wednesday, MRSA in the LA County jails.

John Rabe, 89.3-KPCC.