PREVENTING THE TRANSMISSION OF DISEASE IN ATHLETICS

Many sports, especially wrestling, involve close physical contact between participants, and with that comes the risk of infectious skin disease transmission. Some of the diseases that are commonly contracted within the sport of wrestling, either through skin-to-skin contact transmission or from unsanitized or improperly sanitized wrestling mats include (but are not limited to): shingles, chicken pox, cold sores, conjunctivitis and skin lesions.

The following hygiene recommendations can help to reduce the possibility of spreading such diseases:

- **Use Disinfectants and Cleaners**
  
  This is an important step in your school’s hygiene protocol. Use a disinfectant that according to the bottle label kills the following: *human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)*; *herpes simplex type I, streptococcus faecalis, streptococcus silvarius*; *staphylococcus aureus*; and *trichophyton mentagrophytes*.

  Make sure the entire wrestling mat surface remains damp with the proper ratio of disinfectant solution for the contact/dwell time listed. This is a vital step in the disinfecting process. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requires each manufacturer to specify this contact time on the product’s label for the listed organisms to be killed.

  If the solution is pre-mixed, be aware of its life expectancy and discard old mixtures that have expired. A solution of one part bleach to ten parts water is commonly used to disinfect equipment. Once bleach is diluted it must be replaced every 24 hours to be an effective disinfecting agent.

  When the disinfectant is taken from its original container and put into a secondary bottle (such as a spray bottle), make sure the secondary bottle is labeled with the name of the product and any hazard warnings as found on the original container.

- **Athletic Mats and Equipment**

  Clean and disinfected mats are essential in stopping the spread of infectious organisms. Wrestling mats should be in a state of good repair. Repair any rips/tears according to the manufacturer’s recommended procedures. Germs can migrate through the rips in the mat to the foam padding beneath, potentially perpetuating problems. Companies are available that can professionally resurface or repair torn or cracked mats.

  Clean and disinfect wrestling mats daily after team use. This same protocol of daily cleaning/disinfection also applies to exercise equipment, weight training equipment, and children’s toys. Wall mats should also in a state of good repair and properly cleaned/disinfected after each use.

- **Clean Wrestling Gear and Clothing**
Include all wrestling gear that is used on a daily basis in the team’s overall daily hygiene protocol to ensure that it is clean and potentially germ free. Athletes should refrain from sharing wrestling gear, towels, razors, water bottles and any other equipment that could potentially harbor infectious agents.

Clean and disinfect the soles of wrestling shoes, headgear, knee sleeves and pads daily. During athletic practices and contests, an ample supply of towels should be available. Disposable towels and tissues are recommended. Towels must be used for one individual only and then disposed of in an appropriate receptacle. If the towels used are not disposable then proper washing after use must occur. The most important factor in laundering clothing contaminated in the school setting is elimination of potentially infectious agents by using soap and water. The addition of bleach will further reduce the number of infectious agents. If the material is bleachable, add ½ cup of household bleach to the wash cycle. If the material is not colorfast, add ½ cup non-chlorine bleach to the wash cycle. Universal precautions and personal protective equipment (PPE), i.e.; gloves, must be worn when handling blood or objects contaminated with blood.

All athletes must practice in freshly washed and properly dried clothing. This is vital. Athletes should not reuse unwashed towels. The above stated washing instructions should be followed for washing personal sports clothing.

- **Personal Hygiene**

  The best way to avoid an unwanted disease comes down to personal hygiene. Before entering the wrestling room for practice and before every scheduled match, coaches should conduct daily screening of every athlete. Athletes with rashes or other potentially infectious skin conditions should seek medical attention. No wrestling should occur with an active skin infection. Many coaches require athletes to shower before they participate in practice or a meet.

  After wrestling is over, it is recommended that the athletes take showers at the school where they wrestled. If this practice is not followed, encourage athletes to shower the first thing when they return home, using antibacterial body and hair products.

- **Summary**

  Developing an infection control program providing education, improving hygiene practices among athletes, utilizing recommended practices for cleaning/disinfection and handling of blood will reduce risks of disease transmission among student athletes.

  Further information regarding guidelines for handling body fluids in schools can be found in the OSPI Guidelines for Implementation of Hepatitis B and HIV School Employee Trainings handbook.

  Thanks to Sally Logue, Nurse Corps Supervisor, ESD 112 for contributing this article.