**USA Wrestling**

**Clean and Mean: Maintaining Good Hygiene On and Off the Mat**

By Matt Krumrie



Staph infection, MRSA, impetigo, ringworm: these terms can make wrestlers, coaches, and parents cringe. And in much the same way that a last-second mental lapse can result in a heartbreaking defeat during a match, without proper education, awareness, and a strict plan of action, skin infections can also negatively impact a wrestler’s performance. Indeed, as Nate Naasz, head wrestling coach for the Lincoln (Ks.) High School wrestling programs says: “Good hygiene is as important to wrestling as perfecting a proper single-leg takedown.”

Skin infections are of particular concerns to wrestlers, Naasz explains. "Our athletes are susceptible to skin infections from contact with their opponents as well as the competition mat,” he notes. “It's vital that wrestlers stay healthy during the season. Prevention and treatment of skin infections are a part of this. Coaches and parents need to work in tandem to communicate the importance of proper personal hygiene as well as the proper cleaning and maintenance of equipment and clothing."

Education and taking proper precautions are paramount to avoiding skin infections, agrees Tom Bunge, CEO of Matguard USA, the official supplier of antiseptic wipes, sprays, foams, and surface disinfectants for USA Wrestling’s major events and the only FDA-approved antibacterial product on the market.

"Wrestling is a tough sport, let's not make it tougher by keeping kids off the mat because they are dealing with skin infections," says Bunge. "We all have to take steps to prevent skin infections.” He advises every coach, club, and program to have a system in place to ensure proper hygiene protocol is followed. Whatever that system is, drill home the fact that hygiene and cleanliness are just as important as winning a big match, pinning your rival, and perfecting an ankle pick.

"If you don't have a plan in place, you're running the risk of a whole lot of things that could be detrimental to your wrestler and the sport," says Frank Popolizio, who is director of the Niskayuna, New York-based Journeymen Wrestling Club and an assistant coach at Shenendehowa High School in Clifton Park, New York. "You're risking your club or team’s reputation and you risk hurting other people. Entire teams have been shut down because of infection. No one wants that. I take that stuff seriously and so should others.”

Naasz says his high school’s coaches wash school-issued practice gear every night with antibacterial soap. Team members wipe themselves down with antibacterial wipes, foam, and sprays before every practice. In addition, the mat is washed with antibacterial solution prior to and after each practice.  At the conclusion of practice, wrestlers are required to shower using antibacterial soap before leaving for home. Wrestlers also conduct daily skin checks on each other and the coaching staff takes time to spot check the squad.

The same skin issues that can affect experienced wrestlers can also affect kids of any age or gender. As a result, the same protocol should be followed at all levels of wrestling, says Bunge. “Get young wrestlers into a routine early,” he says. “Good hygiene is just as important as wearing your headgear and wearing your singlet. Teach this early and emphasize that it’s just part of the sport.”

Because wrestling is a contact sport, skin infections are practically unavoidable. The key is to catch any infection early so proper steps can be put in place. That's why coaches and parents need to make sure that the lines of communication are always open when it comes to discussing and reporting skin infections.

"It's imperative that the wrestler shares the discovery [of an infection] with their coach and parents immediately so steps can be taken to stop the spread and begin treatment," says Naasz.

Popolizio agrees. "It's about much more than just missing time on the mat," he says. "You could really hurt yourself and affect others. We're all responsible for taking the necessary steps for preventing and avoiding the issues that can be caused from skin infections."

**Tips to prevent skin disease/infections:**

**Communication is key:** Coaches need to emphasize the importance of good hygiene/cleanliness with assistant coaches, wrestlers and parents from day one. It takes a team effort to prevent skin diseases/infections and everyone needs to work together.

**Coaches:** Mandate wrestlers conduct daily skin checks with each other before practice or a match. Coaches should also spot check the team to make sure nothing is overlooked. Encourage open lines of communication and don't punish a kid for coming forward about a skin infection.

**Wrestlers:** Bring multiple sets of clean clothes to practice every day. Wipe downs of wrestlers, mats and equipment before and after every match/practice should be mandatory. Wash and clean all clothes after each practice and only wear clean clothes at the next day's practice. Do not wear dirty, sweaty or soaked clothes/equipment that have been left in a gear bag or locker. Air dry your gear bag every day. Always wipe down or shower before putting street clothes back on. Look out for your teammates and be sure they are following team protocol and guidelines for skin disease prevention.

**Parental role:** Encourage your wrestlers to wipe down before, during, and after practices and matches and emphasize the importance of bathing/showering regularly at home or school. Make sure that clothes are washed daily, or that new clean clothes are worn daily. Ensure gear bags and equipment are also allowed to air out and dry as well as get occasionally disinfected. Emphasize the importance of making this a part of the daily routine and discuss it often with your son or daughter.

**Tournament tips:** When wrestling multiple matches in a day, be sure to wipe down before and after each match. But also be sure to wipe down before sitting in the crowd, eating food, or the car or bus ride home. Wrestlers should immediately shower when they get home if they’re unable to shower at the match site.

**Practice tips:** Mandate teammates go through skin checks before every practice. Coaches, spot check wrestlers each day to catch anything possibly missed. Change shirts throughout practice. Keep your locker clean and wash clothes every day. Never practice in any clothes that have been used but not washed/cleaned.

**Equipment check:** Don't leave clothes or wet/sweaty knee pads in a bag or locker. Clean/air out the bag every day. Wipe down headgear every day, especially if it's in a bag that includes other dirty clothes, knee pads, shorts, socks, etc.

**When a skin infection occurs:** Report any sign of a skin infection to the coach immediately. Skin infections such as MRSA, impetigo, ringworm and herpes are serious. Staph infections are serious. The consequences of avoiding skin diseases can be harmful. Never hide the fact you have a skin infection/disease.