

Athlete Hygiene in Sports: More Than Just the Yuck Factor

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Athletes want to stay healthy and injury-free so that they can keep enjoying their time in sport and compete at their best. As athletes transition through their tween and teen years, parents often provide less oversight of hygiene and ask their athlete to take more responsibility. Neglecting proper hygiene, however, is more than just smelly; it can lead to serious illness and time lost from sport. The American Academy of Pediatrics (*Pediatrics*, Oct. 2017) says that, “Athletes should be taught proper personal hygiene (eg, hand-washing, showering, and proper laundering of uniforms and practice clothing on a daily or regular basis).

The main reason that proper hygiene is important is that an athlete can encounter many different types of infectious organisms when participating in sports. Some are spread by skin contact, like methicillin-resistant *S aureus* (commonly known as MRSA), streptococcal skin infections, and herpes simplex virus, among others. Other infections are spread from person to person by respiratory droplet (COVID-19, influenza, Strep), airborne particles (Chickenpox, Measles), or from transmission of bloodborne pathogens (HIV, hepatitis B and C).

Some of the more common, yet severe, skin infections, like MRSA, are caused by contact with the skin and can be prevented with proper cleaning of surfaces and good personal hygiene. These infections can become quite serious and can lead to surgeries and weeks of IV antibiotics if not caught early. These organisms can be found on gymnastics mats and get into the body through openings in the skin like callous rips. Athletes should shower after practice, store dirty practice attire separately from clean items, take practice attire out of your gym bag immediately after practice (to avoid contact with clean items) and wash practice attire after wearing it once. This not only helps to reduce unpleasant odors (which coaches and parents everywhere are thankful for), but it can also help to reduce the risk of skin infections. It’s also good practice to use disinfecting sprays or wipes to clean any personal use items, like foam rollers, bands, or weights that have come into contact with gym floors or mats after each practice. Clean your water bottle after each practice, as well.

Other sports-related infections that spread from contact or respiratory droplet can be prevented by proper hand washing and not sharing water bottles, towels, clothing, hairbrushes, and razors.

Proper personal hygiene can really make a difference to an athlete’s health!