

BACKGROUND

Group A *Streptococcus* (strep) is a bacterium often found in the throat and on the skin. Most strep infections are relatively mild illnesses such as strep throat, or a skin infection called impetigo. On rare occasions, these bacteria can cause potentially life-threatening diseases. Approximately 11,000 to 13,000 cases of invasive strep disease occur each year in the United States, resulting in 1,100 to 1,600 deaths.

WHO DOES THE ISSUE IMPACT?

Anyone can get an invasive strep infection. Although healthy people can get an invasive strep infection, people with chronic illnesses like cancer, diabetes, and chronic heart or lung disease, and those who use medications such as steroids have a higher risk. Individuals with skin lesions (such as cuts, chickenpox, and surgical wounds), the elderly, people who live in crowded spaces or are in confined settings (such as nursing homes, homeless shelters, correctional facilities, or child care centers), and adults with a history of alcohol abuse or injection drug use also have a higher risk for strep infections.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

A person with invasive strep disease can become very ill within 12 – 24 hours.

Early signs and symptoms may include:

- High fever;
- Severe muscle aches/pain;
- Localized muscle tenderness;
- Redness at the site of a wound;
- Dizziness;
- Confusion; and
- Flat rash over large areas of the body (occurs in 10 percent of cases).

CAUSES AND TRANSMISSION

Strep bacteria are spread through direct contact with mucus from the nose or throat of people who are infected or through contact with infected wounds or sores on the skin. People who are sick with strep throat or skin infections are most likely to spread the infection. People who carry the bacteria but have no symptoms can still spread the bacteria. People with strep throat can spread the bacteria to others until 24 hours after antibiotic treatment or for 10 to 21 days if not treated.

COMPLICATIONS

Although rare, severe cases of strep can cause pneumonia, organ failure, long-term heart problems, life-threatening skin infection, arm/leg amputations, and death. These infections may occur when bacteria get into parts of the body where bacteria are not typically found, such as the blood, muscle, or the lungs. Two of the most severe forms of invasive strep are necrotizing fasciitis (occasionally described by the media as “the flesh-eating bacteria”) and Streptococcal Toxic Shock Syndrome (STSS). However, these are uncommon.



TESTS AND DIAGNOSIS

Strep bacteria can be treated with common antibiotics like penicillin. Early treatment may reduce the risk of death from strep disease. However, even the best medical care does not prevent death in every case. For those with very severe illness, care in an intensive care unit (ICU) may be needed. For people with necrotizing fasciitis, surgery often is needed to remove damaged tissue and stop disease spread.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

You can prevent the spread of strep infection by:

- Cleaning your hands often, including before preparing or eating food, before touching your eyes, nose or mouth, after using the restroom and after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing;
- Washing hands with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand rub;
- Covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze;
- Coughing or sneezing into your upper sleeve or elbow, not your hands, if you don't have a tissue;
- Washing glasses, utensils, and plates after someone who is sick uses them; and
- Keeping wounds (like cuts or scrapes) clean to prevent infections.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, visit our website www.health.pa.gov

If you have any questions, contact us at 1-877-PA-HEALTH