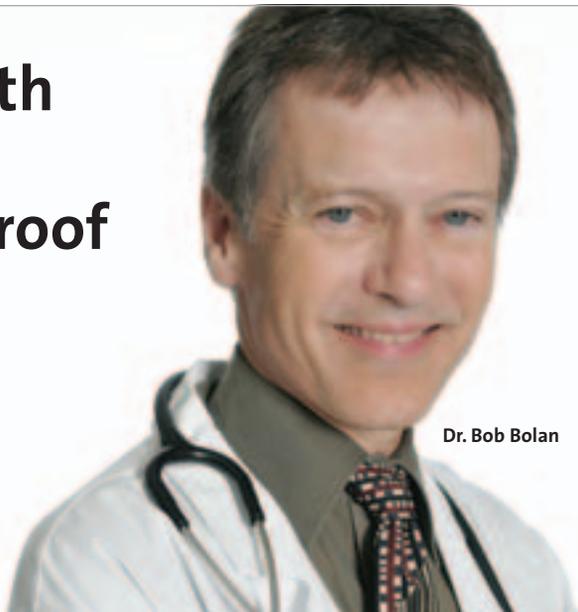


The Truth About Bulletproof Staph

The doctor is *IN!* L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center Medical Director Bob Bolan weighs in on the superbug hysteria.



Dr. Bob Bolan

BY PAULO MURILLO

In mid-January, researchers at the University of California, San Francisco released a study warning that a rise of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) was being passed through gay sex. Several media outlets took the study and began running stories on a new gay cancer that's ravishing the gay community. It wasn't long before alarmist anti-gay groups fanned the flames of hysteria by referring to a "new gay plague" brought on by "sexual deviancy," forcing UCSF to issue an apology saying the information could be interpreted as misleading.

To help separate the medical facts from the fiction, we sat down with Dr. Bob Bolan, medical director of the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center, who stressed the importance of education and common sense as vital to preventing new MRSA infections.

What can you tell us about this new gay bulletproof flesh-eating super MRSA bug that has gotten so much media attention lately?

As far as I know there's one epidemic nationally with MRSA. It has been around for years. [Places where people congregate] like hospitals, nursing homes, gay bathhouses and skid row are all at an increased risk. Populations with health problems such as HIV tend to be more susceptible to infection, but it can be transmitted to people who are HIV negative, so you don't have to be ill.

Are the MRSA strains more resistant than they were years ago?

No. I think what's new is that the media are starting to report on it, so the public thinks it is something new, but it's not.

How does one become infected?

You can't get MRSA from picking up somebody's cup, but if the bacteria is on a wet floor and you get it on your feet—and if you have a break in your skin—then it can infect you. It's not necessarily sexually transmitted.

What are the signs of a nasty case of MRSA?

It invades tissue and it can cause deep abscesses. Most people think it is a spider bite. It's usually a raised red area with a central area that's a puss-fueled boil or pimple. It is very painful, it burns, enlarges rapidly and it is very tender.

What's the worst case you've ever treated?

People have had abscesses on their scrotums that required extensive surgery. One of our patients developed several abscesses on his buttocks after sitting on a rimming chair at a sex party. A person with MRSA on his skin sat for 5-10 minutes, got up and then this individual sat, squirmed around having a good time and bingo, MRSA was ground down to his skin.

What precautions should people take?

Wash your hands. Whether it's a gym or bathhouse, you ought to clean the environmental surfaces. Take two towels to the gym—one for wiping sweat off of you, and the other for the equipment, making sure that you mark the side that you always put face down. It's up to each person. Do you carry a spray bottle of Lysol to a sex club? Maybe. If you've ever had one of these things in your butt, you're going to think twice. Essentially, education should be the main focus. Examine your sex partner. You can sexually explore with your eyes open. If you see something like a nasty red inflammation, then take a raincheck.

What are your thoughts on anti-gay groups claiming MRSA is the new AIDS because God hates gays, and so forth?

That is off the mark. High school sports teams and nursing homes with little old ladies are coming down with MRSA. How is that God's retribution? It doesn't categorize anyone based on sexual preference or race. Anyone is at risk.

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