

More Than The Nose Knows



A Smelly Hockey Bag Can Hold A Lot More Than Just Your Equipment

By Eric Weinstein and Joel Willits • Illustrations by Mike Curtis

Pete Rogers will always remember the smell of the bears. The Hershey Bears, that is.

The Bears stunk every time they showed up in Rogers' hometown arena in Rochester, N.Y., and it wasn't their on-ice performance.

"My dad had seats right next to where the players walked out," recalled Rogers, now the equipment manager for the Nashville Predators.

"I will never forget how bad Hershey smelled." Rogers, in his work both with the Predators as well as USA Hockey, knows that smell of hockey equipment better than most.

But if you are a hockey player or a parent, you already know the smell that can build up in the bag after a long weekend on the road or even after daily use. Without proper airing out and periodic cleaning, equipment can not only stink to high heaven, it can be home to a variety of nasty bacteria that can lead to possible infection.

Community Acquired Staph, or CA-MRSA, is an infection that has been found lurking among the equipment of professional, college, high school and clubs sports teams, and could very well be lurking in that nasty hockey bag of yours.

CA-MRSA can be "picked up" or become attached to a person's skin through various paths. It's important for players of all ages and their parents to take the proper steps to reduce the chances of getting an infection from these germs.

First and foremost, you should wash your hands with soap and hot water throughout the day, but especially before or after eating. Players should also shower after games and practices, before they get in the car for the trip home. Towels should not be shared, and players should change into dry, clean clothes before leaving the locker room.

CA-MRSA cannot survive outside the host unless it is contained in debris, such as in a wound's fluid. The infection can also live on towels, sheets, uniforms, equipment or other objects. As a result, all clothes, uniforms and towels should be promptly washed in hot water and cleaned after each use.

"We wash every guys' shirts, shorts and undergarments after each use because that's what touches their skin," said Rogers, who is entering his eighth year with the Predators. "We've heard of a few instances of players getting infections. Guys pay more attention to that now than they may have in the past."

On the road, it is even more important to clean your gear, especially when you're playing in tournaments that feature a number of games played in a short amount of time.

"I try to take my son's gear out and dry it off when we are on the road," said Hannah Shaw, a hockey mom from Woodland Park, Colo. "And yes, I do think about cleaning it more because it smells."

Shaw isn't far off. On a long weekend on the road for a tournament or road-series, players should bring along enough clothes to wear. If this is not possible, clothes that have been used should be washed in the sink with hot water and plenty of soap before being worn again.

Jerseys can be hung out to dry if time does not allow a more thorough cleaning. Equipment should be taken out of the hockey bag and allowed to dry in the hotel room or balcony.

Bacteria can lurk on the equipment, which allows a means for infection to spread quickly among teammates, opponents and through an entire athletic program.

Cuts and scrapes that players get during athletic competitions release bodily fluids that eventually form a scab. The fluid contains good substances, such as immune cells. They also contain bad substances, like bacteria that live on the skin. If a player's gear does not fit appropriately, abrasions may result that can come in contact with CA-MRSA and cause an infection.

These abrasions should be treated immediately to prevent any fluid from reaching sheets, pillows, clothing or equipment.

Parents, players, and coaches should be aware of the signs of infection on the body and any concerns should be taken to a physician or team doctor.

There are countermeasures to avoid infections. The first step is to prevent the CA-MRSA from first getting into the body, as well as reducing the amount of total bacteria and CA-MRSA on the body, if it does become attached. Cleaning hockey gear regularly is one of the best ways to do this.

Hockey equipment can be washed weekly in the washing machine on the hottest but gentlest cycle possible with one tablespoon of bleach mixed per one quart of water. Most washable equipment can be separated from the plastic Velcro attachments or inserts, like shin guards. Helmets and skates can be scrubbed with isopropyl alcohol after each use, with inserts used in the skates changed regularly. The equipment can be dried in the sun, or laid out on the floor to dry.

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"I try to clean gear every two-to-three practices," Shaw said of her son 9-year-old son Ty's gear. "I really just try to clean it as much as I can, pull it out and spray it down."

You can always pay to have your equipment professionally cleaned by any one of the local proprietors. Teams, programs and rinks have contracted special rates with a regular schedule to ensure appropriate equipment hygiene. Do not simply mask the smell of the gear with a fragrance; this does nothing to ward off infection.

"The important thing for youth players is to get their gear to dry completely," Rogers said. "That's the big thing that ruins gear and can cause infection, when they don't let their gear dry out at all."

The best step to take is prevention through education. The more players and parents are aware of possible infection and bacteria, the easier it is to prevent.

"Knowing how much bacteria that can be on the gear," Shaw said, "changes my mind about how much I'll clean his equipment."

It's also never a bad idea for youth hockey associations to offer gentle reminders to parents of players to get into a routine from the start of the season to keep equipment clean, and alert them to the symptoms and signs of a CA-MRSA infection.

If gear is properly cared for, players will not only be at less of a risk for infection, they'll be more pleasant to be around.

Otherwise, they might just end up smelling like a Hershey Bear.

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