

Welcome, Theresa!

[Pick my icons!](#)

[My Message Boards](#)  
[My Message Board Posts](#)

Last recorded weigh-in day: [10/3/2011](#)

# Germ-Free at the Gym

Article By: Kyle Stack

[Print](#) [Email](#)



## Practice cleanliness, and be aware of skin-disease symptoms

You've made the gym a regular part of your routine, and the last thing you want is for harmful microbes at this shared facility to sully your experience. Here's a rundown of the bacteria to be aware of at your local gym and what you can do to combat and avoid them.

"While many patrons will use disinfectant wipes and sprays on treadmills and cardio machines, other high-touch items — dumbbells and balls used in close-contact sports — are often neglected," says Peter Sheldon, vice president of operations and development at Coverall Health-Based Cleaning System, a commercial cleaning company based in Boca Raton, Florida. These are the areas where skin diseases such as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and ringworm are more likely to be found.

### The gym's microscopic bacteria

MRSA is a strain of a staph infection that enters the body through a skin abrasion or cut — even a paper cut. It's passed primarily person-to-person through skin contact or by sweat. That makes it highly present on surfaces such as cardio equipment, weight-room benches, gym mats, barbells and dumbbells.

Kelly Reynolds, an associate professor of environmental health sciences at the University of Arizona, explains how MRSA is transferred. "That equipment is getting sweat upon and is in close contact with the skin's surface to another skin transmission route," Reynolds says.

Sharing items such as combs, towels, razors and razor blades in the gym locker room is another common way that staph, including MRSA, is passed. MRSA occasionally looks like a spider bite but usually passes for something else. "It can look like a pimple," says Kate Lyman, projects coordinator of the University of South Florida's Sports Medicine and Athletic Related Trauma (SMART) Institute.

Two telltale signs MRSA has been contracted: 1) The "pimple" forms over the skin abrasion or cut and is uncommonly sensitive to the touch and 2) you develop a fever simultaneous with the pimple's formation.

MRSA is potentially deadly, although it's rare for it to reach that point. But infections can enter the bloodstream and harm organs (shutting down kidneys, for example). If you're infected, a trip to the hospital is vital; so is prevention.

Create a barrier between the skin and any surface on which MRSA can exist. That means wearing a long-sleeve shirt or pants to cover a skin abrasion, or placing a towel on a bench or a seat during an exercise. Reynolds recommends shaving at home following a workout rather than shaving before exercising. That reduces the chance of MRSA entering a fresh cut on the face. She also says to bring a clean water bottle from home instead of drinking from a water fountain; its spout, along with doorknobs, are bacterial hot spots at the gym.

E. coli is another threat, as it spreads throughout a locker room via fecal matter. Reynolds explains a common scenario: Someone sits on a locker-room bench with his bare buttocks and gets up. Another person walks by, places a hand on the same spot, then uses that hand to wipe his face or touch another surface. Now it's been transferred.

Reusing a towel from a shower or wearing dirty underwear are other methods of contracting E. coli. Reynolds is adamant about using or wearing something once, then washing it, as the best safeguard against E. coli.

### Fungi common at the gym

Two types of fungi make their way into the gym: athlete's foot and ringworm.

### Recent Articles

- [Personal Trainer: Sore Shoulder? Ready, Set...Surf](#)
- [Buying Guide: Football](#)
- [View all](#)



New Balance 1187 Women's Tennis Shoes | WC1187SP  
**\$119.99**



**FREE** recipes, workouts and more. Get our weekly email newsletter and special offers.  
[Get It Now](#)

**I CAN EVEN DO WORSE**

High blood pressure can lead to **serious** conditions and make others even worse.

VISIT [Tin3people.com](http://Tin3people.com)

10/11 CVF-1108017

Athlete's foot is caused by a fungus that grows in warm, moist conditions. It is most prevalent in pools, hot tubs and locker rooms, especially in the shower area. Poor ventilation and high humidity in those areas facilitate the growth of fungi.

Reynolds says mold can re-grow to measurable amounts in a continually moist environment within 24 to 48 hours. The fungus makes skin red, scaly and itchy; the webbing of toes is a popular point for it to arise.

Athlete's foot is best avoided by wearing flip-flops in the shower. "Fungus loves warm and moist feet," says Brian Adams, the director of the University of Cincinnati's sports dermatology clinic. He recommends making flip-flops in the shower as much of a habit as brushing your teeth or wearing a seatbelt.

Lyman emphasizes the importance of washing feet while in the shower to keep them clean. (She says to still wear flip-flops in the shower, but to remove them momentarily when you raise your foot to clean it.) Then, make sure they're dry before wearing socks and shoes.

Ringworm, another fungus, is found in similar areas as athlete's foot; it also accumulates on sweat-ridden surfaces. Any part of the body can be infected by ringworm, which appears as a clear, circular pattern with a small red mark that is uniform with the skin's surface. It's often located in the armpit, groin and other sweaty parts of the body.

"The problem with ringworm is it's itchy," Lyman says. She says a person who scratches it too much can break the skin, thus opening a pathway for MRSA or another bacterial infection to invade the body.

Given that athlete's foot and ringworm are caused by fungi, they should be treated with antifungal cream. If ringworm doesn't respond to topical medication, then that's a clue you could have a bacterial infection.

#### **Busting gym cleanliness myths**

Reynolds says towels, as well as all garments, should be washed after one use. She also advocates using cleaning products that have "disinfectant" in their names rather than just "cleaner." "You can actually spread germs to more areas if you're not using a product that has a disinfecting agent in it," Reynolds says.

People are too reliant on high-speed hand dryers and hand sanitizers, according to Sheldon. The former has been shown in studies to blow germs throughout a room, cross-contaminating surfaces, he says. Hand sanitizers should complement washing with soap and water. Use a paper towel to dry them.

Finally, don't let fear influence your health standards. "People don't need to be scared when they walk into the gym," Lyman says. "They just need to be cognizant of their health."

#### **About the Writer**

Kyle Stack is a New York-based freelance reporter who also writes for *ESPN The Magazine*, *Wired.com* and *SLAM*.

[Weight Loss Options](#) | [About Us](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Press Room](#) | [Careers](#) | [Site Map](#)  
[Contact Us](#) | [Help](#) | [Affiliate Program](#) | [Troubleshooting](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#)  
[Privacy](#) | For subscribers only: [Subscription Agreement](#)

The **PointsPlus**® program and related website content are proprietary to Weight Watchers International, Inc. and are licensed to Weight Watchers subscribers solely for their personal use in losing and controlling their weight. Any other use, including but not limited to reproduction or distribution in any form or medium, is strictly prohibited. **WEIGHT WATCHERS** and **PointsPlus** are the registered trademarks of Weight Watchers International, Inc. Trademarks used under license by WeightWatchers.com, Inc.  
© 2011 Weight Watchers International, Inc. © 2011 WeightWatchers.com, Inc. All rights reserved.

