Press Release

Swimmers at public beaches show increased risk of exposure to contagious staph bacteria

University of Miami along with Florida Department of Health, CDC and EPA jointly study epidemiologic sub-tropical ocean beaches

Miami Florida, February 13, 2009: Research, funded by multiple agencies and conducted by the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science and Leonard M. Miller School of Medicine, found that swimmers using public ocean beaches increase their risk for exposure to staph organisms, and may increase their risk for potential staph infections once they enter the water.

"Our study found that if you swim in subtropical marine waters, you have a significant chance -- approximately 37 percent - of being exposed to staph -- either yours or possibly that from someone else in the water near you," explained Dr. Lisa Plano, associate professor of pediatrics and microbiology and immunology at the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine, who collaborated in the study, the first large epidemiologic survey of its kind. "This exposure might lead to staph infection since people colonized with the bacteria carry it into the water with them. Those with open wounds or who are immune compromised are at greatest risk of infection." The good news: results show the potentially virulent variety of antibiotic resistant staph, commonly known as MRSA, makes up less than three per cent of staph from the beach waters sampled during the study.

While people shouldn’t avoid beaches, the research team recommends taking precautions to reduce the risk of infection by showering thoroughly before entering the water and after getting out. More research is needed to understand how long staph (including MRSA) can live in coastal waters, and the uptake and infection rate associated with the beach exposures.
The study was funded through the NSF/National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences Oceans and Human Health (OHH) Center at the University of Miami, the NSF/Small Grants for Exploratory Research, the Florida Department of Health and Environmental Protection, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Environmental Protection Agency. As one of the four OHH Centers in the World, the Oceans and Human Health Center at the University of Miami brings together medical and ocean researchers to investigate how humans affect oceans and how oceans affect humans in tropical and subtropical environments.

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