

Fatal cases of staph infections on the rise

By Linda A. Johnson
Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. — Flesh-eating bacteria cases, fatal pneumonia and life-threatening heart infections suddenly are popping up around the country, striking healthy people and stunning their doctors.

The cause? Staph, a bacteria better known for causing skin boils easily treated with standard antibiotic pills.

No more, say infectious disease experts, who increasingly are seeing these "super bugs" — strains of *Staphylococcus aureus* unfazed by the entire penicillin family and other first-line drugs.

Until a few years ago, these drug-resistant infections were unheard of except in hospital patients, prison inmates and the chronically ill. Now, resistant strains are infecting healthy children, athletes and others with no connection to a hospital.

"This is a new bug," said Dr. John Bartlett, chairman of the committee on antibiotic resistance at the Infectious Diseases Society of America. "It's a different strain than in the hospital ... more dangerous than other staph."

Bartlett, a professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, treated three young Baltimore-area women this year who got pneumonia from this strain of staph. All had to be put on breathing machines, and one died, he said.

This month, a Salem, Ind., boy who carries the bacteria in his body, caused concern among parents whose children attend school with the youngster.

The infections will be a hot topic at

the society's annual meeting this week in Boston. The group has been warning that drug companies aren't developing enough new antibiotics to avert a crisis.

Dr. John Segreti, an infectious disease specialist at Chicago's Rush University Medical Center, estimates about one in 10 patients, some with prior health problems, die from the infections.

Dr. Dan Jernigan, a Centers for Disease Control epidemiologist, said athletes, children and military recruits are at higher risk. They are more likely to get cuts and scrapes and share close quarters and items such as towels and soap. Another factor is overuse of antibiotics, which tends to kill weak bacteria and help hardier ones develop resistance.

"Clinicians will have to think differently about skin infections," Jernigan said. "We treat most skin infections without ever testing them."

Testing will tell whether a strain is antibiotic-resistant, but the tests are expensive.

There are no national statistics on these infections, but health authorities are debating whether doctors should be required to report them.

CDC has reported on numerous infection clusters, including Colorado fencing club members, college football players in Pennsylvania and Los Angeles, high school wrestlers in Indiana, and dozens of Pacific Islanders in Hawaii. Many patients were hospitalized, including most of the athletes. At least two outbreaks have occurred among Native Alaskans since 1996, with many cases linked to steam baths.