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## Sick Swine Is the Mascot of This Season's Big Foe

By Preston Williams

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Welcome back. No, make that watch your back.

The greatest threat to a high school athlete's good health this season might not be an aggressive opponent. It might be an infected teammate.

In the coming months, high school athletes will be passing not only balls and relay batons and water bottles and equipment to each other. Some will be passing the H1N1 flu virus.

According to the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, swine flu could infect almost half the U.S. population and cause up to 90,000 deaths, mostly in children and young adults.

Not to sound alarmist, but in some ways, the kids who are in the best shape -- athletes -- could be among those in the worst shape when it comes to avoiding H1N1.

"The sports environment is . . . ideal for the spread of the virus," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention spokeswoman Artealia A. Gilliard wrote in an e-mail. "You have hard, non-porous equipment, and novel H1N1 can stay alive on surfaces like these anywhere from two to eight hours."

Athletes would seem to be buffered. Most are fit and boast hardy immune systems. But athletes also are more susceptible to the virus because of the frequent physical contact they have with teammates, opponents and, as Gilliard pointed out, infected surfaces and clothing.

One infected touch to the nose, mouth or eyes could spread the virus. One uncovered sneeze could theoretically infect a huddle. Pitchers and quarterbacks, stop licking your fingers; the germs can live on the ball. Drowsy sub, don't rub your eyes. Forty guys have touched that water cooler you just visited.

Wrestlers? Well, that's skin-to-skin combat. The best wrestling move this season might be a hack nelson -- just cough on the guy.

You're not immune, either, band members. The flu information circulated by Howard County schools advises students not to share instrument mouthpieces.

As for prevention, students are advised to cough and sneeze into the bend of an arm (preferably their own) if there is no tissue available and to wash their hands frequently. The CDC advises the infected to stay home for seven days after the onset of illness or until at least 24 hours after the

symptoms have disappeared. Students with sick household members are advised to stay home for five days.

Doesn't exactly fit the profile of kids who take their sports seriously, does it?

"We know that athletes tend to play when they are hurt or sick," Gilliard wrote, "but this year, coaches should encourage sick kids to stay home." The CDC has not released sports-specific guidelines.

At the risk of sounding like a germaphobe, one man's handshake is another man's virus vehicle. Is the postgame, midfield handshake between opposing team members, complete with the mantra of "good game," "good game," "good game," all of a sudden a bad idea, bad idea, bad idea?

After a football game, that's about 120 guys, who have been outside for hours and probably sneezed or coughed and didn't wash, all shaking hands, slapping five, fist-bumping and hugging each other. That's not sportsmanship. That's germ warfare. The CDC spokeswoman said shaking or not shaking hands is a "decision best left to individual teams."

Late last month, Fairfax County schools started selling a \$49 Bacteria Defense Kit, which contains the same high-powered cleaning solutions that the schools -- and even hospitals -- use (<http://www.fcps.edu/supt/activities/atp>).

The products can treat skin, clothing and surfaces, from shinguards to backpacks to lockers and desks. Jon Almquist, the athletic training administrator for Fairfax schools, said the kit should last for at least a season.

Mike Brinich, spokesman for CSG/SportsCoatings, said recently that the company shipped 500 kits to Fairfax schools and has an additional 2,000 ready to ship. He added that Fairfax is the first school district of its size to offer the kits.

Fairfax might be on to something. This school year, implementing an effective flu defense is far more important than installing a zone or a man-to-man.

*Varsity Letter is a weekly column about high school sports in the Washington area. E-mail Preston Williams with comments or story ideas at [williamsp@washpost.com](mailto:williamsp@washpost.com).*