**Skin Health for Wrestlers**

 Wrestling is a sport which challenges athletes both mentally and physically more so than most other sports out there. Wrestling has a very deep pedigree when it comes to human history as it was one of the initial Olympic sports practiced in ancient Greece and virtually every single culture, past and present, is known to practice some form of grappling for sport.

 Whether its concussions in boxing or ACL tears from playing soccer, there are certain risks that come along with participation that practitioners should be aware of and educated on. There are inherit risks associated with wrestling that are absent in most other sports, one of the main risks being increased chances of acquiring communicable skin infections. Often this is a topic deemed taboo and not spoken about honestly and openly which perpetuates the incidence of skin infections in wrestlers. It’s important to note that most of the skin conditions wrestler’s get are readily treatable and not life threatening in healthy immune-competent individuals.

First things first, let’s talk about what causes skin infections. Generally speaking there are three different types of microorganisms that cause skin infections in grappling we should familiarize ourselves with. There are Viruses such as herpes simplex virus (HSV) most known for causing cold sores. Next up are Bacteria such as *Staphylococcus Aureus* which can cause many skin infections such as impetigo or folliculitis. Finally we have Fungus from which there are many different strains that causes everything from ringworm to athlete’s foot.

Ok so why are participants of grappling sports more likely to get a skin infection? Grappling sports involve a lot of skin-to-skin contacts with several different people on mats, typically in environments that are warm and moist. Additionally skin abrasions are a common occurrence (especially with training partners who don’t trim their nails, more on this after). All these factors combined put athletes who participate in grappling sports at increased risk of acquiring a skin infection.

Now let’s talk a little bit about how these infections occur and spread to others. Firstly and perhaps most well-known is from direct skin-to-skin contact with an individual who has an active contagious skin infection. Pretty simple right? Well there two other major ways these infections are spread that some people who grapple are unaware of. Self-infection via a small abrasion or any opening would on the skin (doesn’t matter how small) that isn’t properly rinsed out and disinfected can potentially become infected. Fomites are another potential source of spreading communicable skin infections. Fomites are infectious inanimate objects such as your soiled wrestling equipment or non-sanitized wrestling mats. If you re-use soiled equipment or training on unsanitized mats, you and your training partners are once again at increased risk of acquiring a skin infection Remember that the next time you throw your use gym clothes in your locker or gym bag without having them washed (and how it smells the next day, which by the way is fungus flourishing).

Now let’s get to the most important part, what you can do to protect yourself and training partners.

1. Showering- always shower immediately after practice. Be sure to use a fresh towel every time (used towels are potential fomites) and flip flops are encouraged in public showering facilities.
2. Separate Bags- Keep soiled gym clothes in a mesh or plastic bag separate from your clean duffle bag. Only after they are laundered can you put them back in your main duffle bag and with your other clean equipment. Remember that your mesh bag which stores soiled gym clothes should also be washed each time after use as well.
3. Laundry- Don’t reuse gym clothes more once without washing them. Be sure to wipe all other accessory equipment (knee pads, headgear etc.) with sanitizing alcohol after each use.
4. Open Wounds- It is not a good idea to train if you have an open wound until it is healed and there is no chance of it being re-opened and getting infected. If you insists on training, ensure it is properly bandaged up. If you get an abrasion during practice, disinfect immediately and cover it up. Do not return to practice with an open wound as you are just putting yourself at risk if you do.
5. Active skin infection- If you have an active skin infection, see your doctor and do not train with others until you are non-contagious.
6. Shaving- Avoid needles shaving if you can as shaving temporarily compromises the natural protective barrier on your skin and increases your chances of getting an infection. If you must shave, try to on day you are not training, or after your training session (and not immediately before).
7. Fingernails- Always keep your nails neatly trimmed to reduce the chance of your scratching your training partners as mentioned above open wounds are potential infection sources.
8. Barrier foam- If you find you are one of those individuals who is more prone to getting skin infections, consider using protective foam shields when training and competing.
9. Equipment- Always encourage your coaches to mandate sanitizing down mats after each practice (you can make a cool down exercise of it). Sanitize the bottoms of your wrestling shoes each time you step off the mat and go back on. You should try to avoid walking off the mats until you are finished practice. You can do this by keeping water bottles or towels near the edge of the mat. Be sure to not wear your wrestling shoes in areas that are not wrestling mats (such as the weight room). Be sure to not share equipment, whether that be towels or headgear.
10. Pimples- Avoid picking pimples or scabs, as these are especially susceptible to becoming infected.
11. Daily checks- Be proactive with your skin. Give yourself quick daily checks and see if you spot anything different or unusual. If you do notice something, tell your coaches right away.

Well there you have it. We went over a lot in this article and it may be daunting at first. Practice these habits above and encourage your training partners to do the same and it will eventually become second nature.

By: Youcef Soufi, University of Maniotba Manitoba 3rd Year Medical student