Study: Lesser-Known Bug A Bigger Hospital Threat

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ATLANTA (AP) — As one superbug seems to be fading as a threat in hospitals, another is on the rise, a new study suggests.

A dangerous, drug-resistant staph infection called MRSA is often seen as the biggest germ threat to patients in hospitals and other health care facilities. But infections from Clostridium difficile — known as C-diff — are surpassing MRSA infections, the study of 28 hospitals in the Southeast found.

"I think MRSA is almost a household name. Everybody thinks of MRSA as a serious threat," said Dr. Becky Miller, an infectious diseases specialist at Duke University Medical Center. She presented the research Saturday in Atlanta, at a medical conference on infection in health care facilities.

"But C. difficile deserves more attention," she added.

MRSA, or methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, are bacteria that can't be treated with common antibiotics. They are often harmless as they ride on the skin, but become deadly once they get in the bloodstream. They enter through wounds, intravenous lines and other paths.

C-diff, also resistant to some antibiotics, is found in the colon and can cause diarrhea and a more serious intestinal condition known as colitis. It is spread by spores in feces. The spores are difficult to kill with most conventional household cleaners or alcohol-based hand sanitizers, so some of the disinfection measures against MRSA don't work on C-diff.

Deaths from C-diff traditionally have been rare, but a more dangerous form has emerged in the last ten years. Still, MRSA is generally considered a more lethal threat, causing an estimated 18,000 U.S. deaths annually.

The new study looked at infection rates from community hospitals in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia in 2008 and 2009. It found the rate of hospital-acquired C-diff infections was 25 percent higher than MRSA infections.

Here are the numbers: The hospitals counted 847 infections of hospital-acquired C-diff, and 680 cases of MRSA.

Miller also reported that C-diff was increasing at the hospitals since 2007, while MRSA has been declining since 2005.

Last year, a government report noted a decline in MRSA infections in a study of 600 hospital intensive-care units. MRSA bloodstream infections connected with intravenous tubes fell almost 50 percent from 1997 to 2007, according to data reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

C-diff has seemed to be increasing in recent years, but the trend is not uniform — some hospitals report falling rates. The prevalence of different infections can vary in different parts of the country, said Dr. L. Clifford McDonald, a CDC expert who was not part of the Duke study.

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