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Pedicure infections outbreak larger than previously thought

By April Lynch
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For some pedicure patrons, the infected sores on their legs appeared more than a year ago. Others had bounced from doctor to doctor, looking for some way to cure mysterious boils that wouldn't heal. One woman, thinking she was beset by bug bites, had her house sprayed.

Such ordeals, coming to light Wednesday, point to an outbreak of serious pedicure-related skin infections in Santa Clara County that is broader, more complex and started earlier than previously believed.

Earlier this week, health officials said they knew of about 30 such infections over the past few months. But patients and doctors reported dozens of previously unknown cases Wednesday, county health officials said. Other suspected cases, described by an additional dozen victims who contacted the Mercury News, date back as far as 2003.

State and local health inspectors still are trying to determine the cause and gauge the scope of the outbreak. But the growing numbers of suspected cases make it clear that health investigators and doctors have a complicated problem to solve -- and many people to help.

Some people called county health workers Wednesday with cases that go back as far as May, said county health spokeswoman Joy Alexiou. ``Some said they still have lesions on their legs," she said. ``They are being advised to go see their doctor and get tested."

Women who contacted the Mercury News told of infections that wouldn't heal, with oozing sores that baffled doctor after doctor.

``I took antibiotics for months," said Kelly Vergason, 23, who used to get regular pedicures and first noticed a sore on her left leg in August 2003. She sought help from two physicians and is going back for more tests.

``It still hurts," she said. ``I'm never getting a pedicure again."

The suspected culprit in the infections is a microbe called non-tuberculous mycobacterium, the same type of bacteria that triggered boils and skin ulcers in about 110 customers of a Watsonville nail salon four years ago.

The bacteria is commonly found in low levels in water supplies. Under the right conditions, the microbe can breed and more easily infect the skin -- and footbaths in some pedicure salons have proved to be a place where it thrives.

Many nail salons offer the whirlpool footbaths, which are built into the bottom of elaborate spa chairs. The footbaths, using a system of jets, filters and pipes, swirl warm water around the feet and legs of patrons. If they are not properly cleaned, the baths collect bits of hair, skin and other debris, becoming breeding grounds for microscopic pests.

All of the women who contacted the Mercury News on Wednesday had used such footbaths before skin infections appeared on their legs. Few of their cases had been reported to the county. Some had one persistent ulcer. Others had dozens.

Lisa Conley's legs erupted in about 30 oozing sores, so many that she started using a hair dryer on her legs after showering, fearing a towel would only spread the infection. Three doctors offered conflicting diagnoses before she found another who prescribed the right antibiotics.

``It was horrible," said the 23-year-old, whose 2003 infection left scars. ``It felt like an endless battle. Women need to wake up -- they don't realize this can happen to them."

Most of the women who contacted the Mercury News had visited one of several San Jose nail salons under state and county investigation. Many said they had patronized Nails National on Snell Avenue.

State inspectors cited the salon for improperly disinfecting its 12 foot spas after an inspection in May. Owner Tamie Than said she and her staff have tried hard to follow state sanitation rules.

``We do follow the state guidelines," Than said. ``Sometimes we get very busy. But we try to keep up the sanitizing as much as we can. I cannot say that we're 100 percent, but we try our best."

Doctors around Santa Clara County are treating patients with infections. The condition is rarely deadly. But it can be tough to diagnose, often requires long courses of special antibiotics, and leaves some women with scars.

Kaiser Permanente's Santa Teresa Medical Center in San Jose has seen 11 suspected cases. At Kaiser-Santa Clara hospital, Dr. Jonathan Blum has treated two. He urges patients to be careful, but not panic.

``If you suspect a problem, make your doctor aware that you have been to a nail salon," Blum said. ``This infection is unpleasant. But we do have treatments that work."

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