

# Herpes Outbreak Suspends High School Wrestling in Minnesota

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MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — High school wrestling was suspended Tuesday across Minnesota due to a widespread outbreak of a skin infection.

The Minnesota State High School League said 24 cases of herpes gladiatorum have been reported by 10 teams. The virus is spread by skin-to-skin contact. Symptoms have included lesions on the face, head and neck of wrestlers.

The league banned competitions and direct contact between wrestlers in practice until Feb. 6. The suspension is meant to control the current outbreak, allow time to diagnose new cases and prevent disqualifications at the state tournament, scheduled for Feb. 28-March 3.

The Minnesota Department of Health has been tracking the virus, caused by herpes simplex type 1, the same strain that causes cold sores.

Officials first became aware of the outbreak at a tournament held in Rochester in late December. Scot Davis, who coaches wrestling at Owatonna High School, has been involved in wrestling in Minnesota for more than 40 years and says he can't remember the league completely shutting down.

Davis' team, which gets doctor checkups several times a week, competed at the Rochester tournament where the outbreak was first detected, yet none of his wrestlers have been infected. He applauds the suspension. "I think it's a bold step," he said. "How else are you going to get this thing cleared up? How do I explain to a mom that her kid has herpes forever?"

Steve Larsen, wrestling coach at Century High School in Rochester, said his team will miss three competitions because of the eight-day suspension. "It's going to make scheduling interesting," he said. "I hope some of it will get rescheduled."

The Century team has had no skin problems this year, Larsen said. But in the past, when a few of his wrestlers came down with ringworm, his team was suspended from practice and competition as a precaution.

Infected wrestlers have to sit out matches and get cleared by doctors before they can resume wrestling, he said. Dr. B.J. Anderson, a former wrestler who acts as a health adviser to the high school league, blames the outbreak on doctors who have been misdiagnosing and inappropriately treating the viral infections as bacterial ones. "(Doctors) are not doing the right tests," he said.

Anderson said the greatest concern is an infection of the eye, which can, in rare cases, lead to scarring or blindness. The virus can remain in a body indefinitely, he said.

A similar outbreak occurred in 1999, affecting 63 wrestlers and disqualifying several of them from the state tournament, Anderson said.

Dr. Henry Balfour, a national expert on herpes who works in the department of virology at the University of Minnesota, said wrestlers are at a higher risk for this sort of infection than other people because of the nature of the sport.

"Usually you have to have damage to the skin," he said. "If there is a break in the skin, ... then the virus could take and cause a skin infection." Balfour said the virus is not fatal but is a detrimental nuisance that can recur.

Such outbreaks are common in the wrestling world, frequently occurring at summer camps, he said.

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