

Health

Scrubs should be freshly scrubbed

By Terri Yablonsky Stat
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The next time you see a health-care worker wearing scrubs in public, think twice. Sure, they look clean and authoritative, but you might wonder if there's a health risk to wandering around town wearing this supposedly sterile garb.

And what about tools of the trade like stethoscopes, blood pressure cuffs and thermometers that are passed from patient to patient? Can these pose a health threat to the public as well as patients?

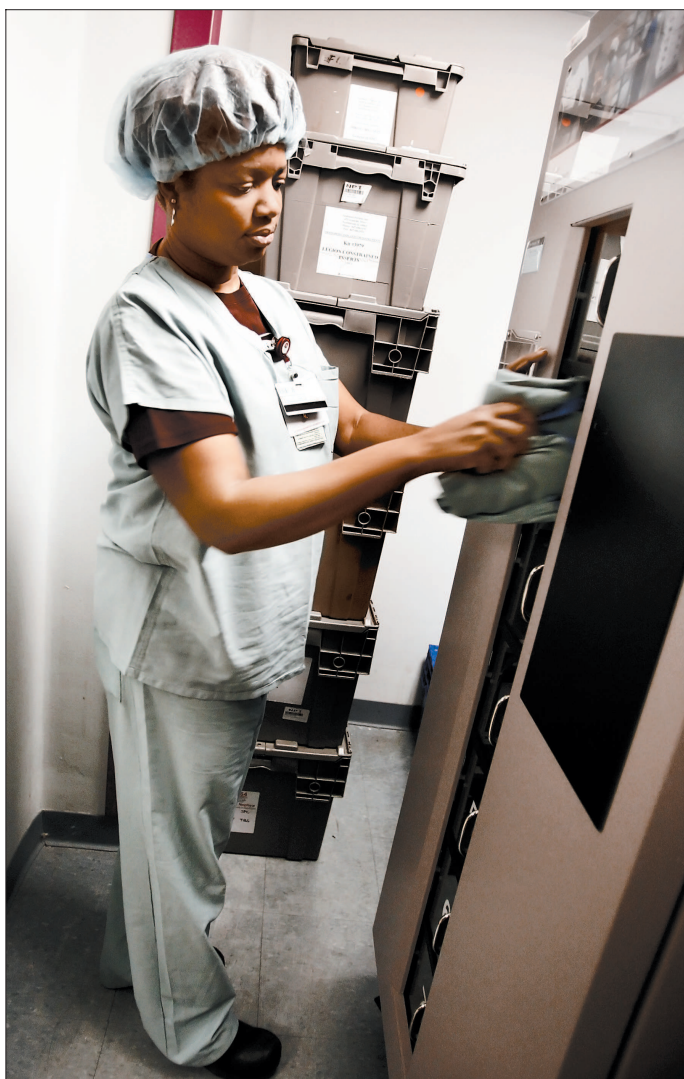
Some health-care professionals think so.

Retired pediatric heart surgeon Dr. Joseph J. Amato of Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center often sees health-care workers wearing their scrubs in public.

"These articles of wear are only to be worn in operating rooms, intensive care areas, nurseries and other delicate areas of extreme cleanliness," Amato said. "On a daily basis I see health-care workers out and about at Walgreens or Costco in the early morning and afternoon hours."

'Nobody enforces it'

"Hospitals say they have strict rules not to leave the hospital with scrubs, but that's not true," said Amato, who lives in Streeterville near Northwestern Memorial Hospital. "Nobody enforces it. I see stethoscopes wrapped around employees' necks getting into their cars. They will be used the next



Tribune photo by Antonio Perez

Nurse Nicola Carter and other University of Chicago Medical Center health-care workers are supposed to wear freshly laundered scrubs to prevent the spread of infections.

morning." Even ties, he said, can pose a health risk if they've had contact with a patient during an exam.

Amato's concerned not just about hospital patients

but also about the risk of health-care workers bringing home infections to families.

But Dr. Gary A. Noskin of Northwestern warns against

jumping to conclusions.

"If you see people out in public wearing scrubs, they may or may not even be health-care workers," said Noskin, associate chief medical officer at the hospital and an infectious disease expert.

Anyone can buy scrubs through a supplier, he said, and health-care workers may wear scrubs for convenience and not work in a restricted area. For example, some residents wear scrubs while sleeping during long shifts.

"While it is preferable to put on clean scrubs in the hospital, someone who enters the hospital wearing scrubs from the outside poses no risk to patients undergoing surgery because the worker must put on a sterile gown over scrubs," said Noskin. "There is no evidence that links scrub suits with increased risk for patient infection following surgery."

Clothes are never sterile, he said. "The single most important way to prevent infection is for health-care workers to wash their hands."

Anyone who enter Northwestern's operating room must wear freshly laundered scrubs from its autovalet, an automated system for dispensing scrubs, Noskin said. Scrubs must be changed when they become visibly soiled. People who have left the OR and are planning to re-enter must don a disposable cover-up. Lab coats should be cleaned regularly.

The same is true at the University of Chicago Medical Center, according to Sylvia Garcia-Houchins, the

hospital's director of infection control. Those who work in the OR must wear hospital-issued, freshly laundered scrubs of a certain color and are not allowed to leave the building wearing that scrub. Those who work outside the restricted area cannot wear that colored scrub. The hospital now monitors doors and issues "red tickets" to staff who wear the restricted-area color in from home.

Endangering the public

Still, Garcia-Houchins sees other health-care workers wearing scrubs in public all the time.

"The biggest problem is if you're wearing your scrubs home after you've taken care of patients," she said. "You don't know if a patient had vancomycin-resistant enterococci [a type of drug-resistant bacteria], which can live up to seven days on clothing. You can take a patient's VRE home and hug your child. Respiratory syncytial virus and rotavirus can live on surfaces like a stethoscope or blood pressure cuff and are a big risk to children too."

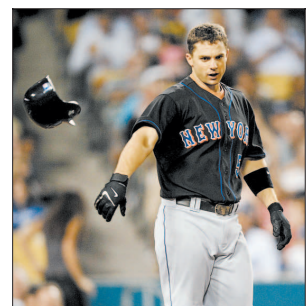
"My biggest concern is hand hygiene and cleaning of equipment that moves from patient to patient," said Garcia-Houchins. "It's the user's responsibility to clean items with an alcohol wipe between patients. Patients have to be more aware and more willing to ask the health-care worker, 'Did you wash your hands? Did you wash this down before using it on me?'"

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DISCOVERIES

E. coli toxin isn't all bad

A new skin patch containing E. coli toxins seems to help prevent travelers' diarrhea, researchers report. The vaccine takes advantage of the skin's potent immune system, according to the study published in the June 12 online issue of The Lancet. The developers of the vaccine hope to have it on the market by 2011.



AP photo by Kevork Djanszian

Poor performances by pro baseball players may be linked to jet lag.

Study explains Cubs' fall in '84

New research suggests that jet lag hampers the performances of continent-crossing pro baseball players but may boost the home-field advantage of West Coast teams. An analysis of 10 years of pro baseball scores found that teams were more likely to lose games if they were severely jet-lagged. The researchers, from the Sleep Medicine Center at Martha Jefferson Hospital in Charlottesville, Va., also found that teams traveling east to west suffered the most.

Tomato paste may be better than fresh tomatoes

By Carolyn Susman
COX NEWS SERVICE

Despite advice that eating a whole food can be superior to eating a supplement or processed food containing the vitamins or minerals of the real thing, the tomato is turning that dictum on its ear.

Even before the recent salmonella outbreak in some types of fresh tomatoes, research had shown that processed tomato products, particularly tomato paste, may fight prostate cancer even better than fresh tomatoes. The latest research from the University of Missouri, in fact, suggests why processed tomato products have better cancer-fighting benefits than the stuff picked off the vine.

"It appears that the greatest protective effect from tomatoes comes from re-

hydrating tomato powder into tomato paste," said Valeri Mossine, research assistant professor of biochemistry in the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources, in a statement released by the university.

"Processing of many edible plants through heating, grinding, mixing or drying dramatically increases their nutritional value and cancer-fighting potential."

This seems counterintuitive to the general dietary rule that something in its original state is superior to a processed food.

The Missouri study found that it isn't just the lycopene in tomatoes that protects against cancer. When linked with a compound called FruHis—a carbohydrate present in dehydrated tomato products—it exerts a stronger protective effect against prostate cancer.

Rats injected with prostate cancer-causing chemicals and fed a diet of tomato paste plus additional FruHis, demonstrated the longest survival rate in the Missouri study. Only 10 percent developed prostate tumors.

Sixty percent in the control group had tumors; 30 percent of the group fed tomato powder had tumors; and 25 percent of the group fed tomato paste alone had prostate tumors.

"Before this study, researchers attributed the protective effect of tomatoes to ascorbic acid, carotenoids or phenolic compounds," Mossine said. "FruHis may represent a novel type of potential dietary antioxidant. Our ongoing research now focuses on unraveling the mechanisms behind why this has a beneficial effect."

The study, published in the June issue of Cancer Re-



Processed tomato products, like tomato paste, may fight prostate cancer.

search, a journal of the American Association for Cancer Research, was financed by the Prostate Cancer Foundation and the MU Agriculture Experiment Station Chemistry Lab, we are told—and not by any food industry group that would benefit from these

findings. A copy of the study states that "no potential conflicts of interest were disclosed."

The Prostate Cancer Foundation is a non-profit group that says on its home page that it links with corporations and businesses that will work toward its goal of conquering this disease. Supporters range from fashion designers Giorgio Armani and Hugo Boss to the Republic of Tea and Major League Baseball.

The study does underscore that it might be a bit controversial because "it suggests the presence of a potential chemo-preventive agent in tomato products prepared by rehydration of tomato powder."

The researchers suggest moving from rats to human clinical trials. Maybe the food industry will jump in here.

Lighting may ease dementia

Relatively simple adjustments in lighting may ease some of the behavioral problems associated with dementia, Dutch researchers suggest.



Group-care facilities that were brightly lit during the day reduced cognitive deficits by 5 per-

cent, cut depression symptoms by 19 percent and slowed down the increase in functional limitations by 53 percent, relative to facilities that had dim light.



Elizabeth Miniscalco, Yoplait Champion, manager of Swedish Covenant Hospital's cancer program, nurse and survivor.

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