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US beach-goers facing threat from superbug

SAN FRANCISCO: The so-called superbug MRSA, a multiresistant strain of staphylococcus usually found in hospitals, has been discovered for the first time on US beaches.

The antibiotic-resistant strain, which is increasingly found in prisons, gym locker rooms and homes, can cause skin conditions and organ ailments and serious and sometimes fatal cases of pneumonia.

"This is the first report of MRSA (Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*) from marine water and inertial beach sand," said Marilyn Roberts, a microbiologist at the University of Washington in Seattle and co-author of the study, during a press briefing.

The study was presented on the first day of the 49th annual Inter-science Conference on Antimicrobial Agency and Chemotherapy (ICAAC),

which is being held in San Francisco this weekend.

The study describes the discovery of the MRSA strain on five out of 10 public beaches along the coasts of Washington and California, where researchers collected sand and water samples between February and September 2008.

Ordinary staphylococcus was found on nine out of the ten beaches.

MRSA was not found in the samples taken from the two California beaches, but the researchers said they did not believe that presence of the strain in Washington was an anomaly.

They said beaches could pose a transmission risk, making it easier for the virulent strain to spread.

Tests showed that the MRSA found on the five beaches was very similar to the antibiotic resistant found most commonly in hospitals, Roberts

said.

"We do not know the risk for any particular beach, but the fact that we found these organisms suggests that the level is much higher than we had thought," she said.

Roberts said the researchers found more organisms in the sand than in the water, explaining that this was likely because the sand acts as a filter for the sea water.

"I am not telling people not to go to the beach," she said, adding that simple precautions could help mitigate the spread of MRSA.

"Hygiene is always important and make sure you get all the sand off... and cover cuts and bruises on the skin," she said.

The study was among many being presented at the San Francisco conference, where papers on the A(H1N1) pandemic, HIV/AIDS and MRSA are top of the agenda. — AFP