

Turf Fields: For Better or Worse?

The Record Investigates the Health Aspects of Four Acres' Artificial Turf

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When Four Acres was covered with artificial turf over the summer of 2006, the athletic department looked to avoid the traditional issues of maintenance of a grass field and help athletes avoid injury. The department has discovered, however, that the turf poses its own risks including the potential for infections and bacterial growth, according to Athletic Trainer Amy Mojica. In response to these concerns, the athletic staff has raised awareness among coaches and players of teams that use the turf.

Unlike grass, which absorbs bacteria, the bacteria remain on the surface of the turf, where the synthetics provide a rich living environment, Mojica added.

Recognizing the potential for health concerns, athletic administrators has advised the Varsity Football team to monitor any skin irritation, rash or even bug bites to see if they develop into potentially dangerous infections. According to Mojica, athletes who play on Four Acres are prone to staph infections. After any player has scraped him or herself on the turf and possibly bled, the turf must be washed, Mojica said.

Each time a player bleeds on the turf, the surface is at a minimum washed off with water, which, according to Mojica, is sufficient in reducing the possibility of infection.

On natural grass fields, the bacteria and other fluids drain away into the soil, minimizing, to the point of eliminating, the risk of transmitting the infection via the grass. "We're not worried so much about breathing infections on natural grass fields," said Mojica.

Director of Physical Facilities and Security John Yeager had not heard of any issues related to dangerous health conditions on the synthetic turf on Four Acres. "We've heard nothing but raves about the new turf," he said. "The athletic department has been warned to watch out for staph infections," said Director of Athletics Robert Annunziata.

Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus, known as MRSA, is a particularly dangerous staph infection as it does not presently have a known cure. The bacteria have been found in locker rooms in the National Football League, college football and even in some high schools, according to a 2005 issue of Sports Illustrated magazine.

Over the last several years the school has not experienced any complications with regard to MRSA, said Mojica. Mojica credits this to the precautionary measures of coaches and players taken in cleaning wounds and monitoring potential infections.

The turf has caused few lasting wounds. In a particularly grueling field hockey practice, Hanna Lee (10) tripped several times on Four Acres, skinning her knee multiple times. "It used to be really infected, but it is fine now," Lee said of her scrape.

The turf did not cause any complications for Football Coach Daniel Hannon, who received a large scrape on Four Acres during a Middle Division football practice a week ago. After following the appropriate treatment, including using Neosporin and hydrogen peroxide, "it is healing pretty well," he said.

Although students have avoided infection, they are still susceptible to injuries. "Turf toe," a condition consisting of a spread of injuries related to artificial turf has come into the lexicon, ranging from mild sprains to damaged cartilage to serious fractures. The condition arises as a result of pounding on the hardness of the turf, according to the book *Foot and Ankle*.

A natural grass field has far more give than a synthetic field; if an athlete digs his or her cleat into the ground of natural field and moves quickly, the soil will give way allowing the foot to move. However, on a synthetic field the ground does not give way, causing more ankle and toes joints to twist, according to Mojica.