

My Hockey Gear Doesn't Smell.... *Does It?*

I'm sure you don't have to try very hard to imagine the stench coming from your bag, or perhaps your bud's, in the change room when the hockey bag is opened. It's almost like it's a living monster as it wraps its' tentacles around you and you feel like you want to barf. It's amazing to think that the stench is so common that many people actually believe that it's normal or worse yet, it's part of their good luck to not wash their equipment all season.

Now this doesn't have to be the case as most of the equipment can be washed, and if aired out between uses, will reduce the smell. It's important to make sure your equipment is removed from the bag when you get home, as it's not a storage bag. The bag is meant for transporting your gear to and from the rink. Remember, without proper airing out and periodic cleaning, your equipment will stink to high heaven and even worse, can be the breeding ground for a variety of nasty bacteria that can lead to infections.

Hanging out to dry

Your Hockey Bag Should NOT Smell

You don't need to wash your equipment after every game or practice, but you should at least hang it to let it dry. There are many inexpensive equipment racks out there that you can hang your equipment on that do a great job of drying out the equipment between uses. It's important that you dry your equipment in a warm room, as it dries faster and the bacteria have less of a chance to grow.

A neat trick for hockey skates is to put them on your home's heater register right after every use to fully dry the insides of your skates. Once they are dry you can sprinkle deodorizing foot powder in them to keep them fresh and odor free.

For many people, the drying effort requires dragging the equipment into the basement and hanging it on a rack. There are other products, like the "hockey cabinet," which allow you to store your equipment when drying and when not in use. The nice thing about the "hockey cabinet" is it could even be in the garage thus making it very accessible and easy to air out your equipment. And if your garage is a little cool, a wall mounted electric heater could easily be placed in the cabinet to aid in the airing out process.

Washing and Cleaning

That New Skate Smell

It's imperative that you keep yourself and your equipment clean. Many professional hockey players have gotten nasty infections because of their unclean gear.

It's advisable to try to clean gear every two-to-three practices and between practices, air out all equipment. Keeping equipment as clean as possible helps avoid infections.

So, how should you keep your hockey gear clean? Here are some ways. Did you know that you can use your washing machine to wash most of your equipment? Most people do not realize this. It is best to use a front loading non-agitator type washing machine such as found in commercial laundromats.

Hockey equipment can be washed weekly in the washing machine, but you should use the hottest and gentlest cycle possible. When washing, it's suggested you use a deodorizing detergent and one tablespoon of bleach mixed per one quart of water. Most washable equipment can be separated from the plastic Velcro attachments or inserts, such as shin guards.

Helmets and skates can be scrubbed with isopropyl alcohol after each use. Skate inserts should be changed regularly.

The hockey helmet can be cleaned using a very mild soap, such as a *no-tear* shampoo and water and then clean the helmet with a sponge. Make sure to fully wash the helmet inside and out and then rinse well making sure to get all the soap off. By using the *no-tear* shampoo it will ensure that if you did not get all the soap out of your helmet that during the next game you won't have stinging shampoo in your eyes. Make sure to fully dry the helmet with a clean towel.

This is a great time to check all your equipment for any loose or broken snaps, damage, or cracks. On the helmet, you should also check for any cracks from hard impacts. If you see any cracks, replace the hockey helmet immediately.

The equipment can be dried in the sun or laid out on the floor to dry on a large drying rack or hung in the "Hockey Cabinet".

If you are very busy and/or don't want to take on the cleaning duty, you can find people who are willing to do it for you, such as laundry services. Quite often, teams, programs, and rinks have arrangements with special rates that ensure appropriate equipment hygiene and will do it on a regular schedule.

Bacteria

The Cause of the Smell and Infections

As you get older, the importance of airing out and washing your equipment becomes vital. It is the bacteria that cause the smell. Bacteria love cool moist environments, such as your hockey bag.

Did you know that common bacteria called Community Acquired Staph, or CA-MRSA, has been found lurking among the equipment of professional, college, high school and clubs sports teams? It could very likely be lurking in that nasty hockey bag of yours.

CA-MRSA can be "picked up" off a person's skin very easily so it's important for players of all ages to take the proper steps to reduce the chances of getting an infection from these germs.

For starters, you should wash your hands with soap and hot water throughout the day, especially before or after eating. You should also shower after EVERY game and EVERY practice, preferably before leaving the rink. Towels should not be shared and you should change into dry, clean clothes before leaving the locker room.

Bacteria can lurk on the equipment (that's that nasty smell you cringe at), which allows a way for infection to spread quickly among teammates, opponents, and through athletic programs. The infection can live on towels, sheets, uniforms, equipment, and other objects so all clothes, uniforms and towels should be washed in hot water and cleaned on a regular basis (preferably after each use).

Keeping Clean on the Road

Quick Cleaning Tips

So all this is great when you're at home and can maintain it all easily between practices or games, but what happens when you have a weekend tournament or you're on the road? You know the smell that can build up in the bag after a long weekend on the road or even after daily use. So, without proper airing out and periodic cleaning, equipment will not only smell, it can be home to a variety of nasty bacteria that can lead to possible infection.

When you're at a tournament or road-series, you should bring along enough clean clothes to wear with a change between games. If this is not possible, clothes that have been used should be washed in the sink with hot water and plenty of soap before being worn again. You can hang them on the shower curtain rod to dry.

Jerseys can be hung out to dry if time does not allow a more thorough cleaning and your equipment should be pulled out of your hockey bag and allowed to dry in the hotel room or on the balcony.

Remember that your hygiene is imperative to stopping the bacteria that can lurk on equipment, which allows a means for infection to spread quickly among teammates, opponents and through an entire athletic program.

Infections

Prevention and Treatment

Cuts and scrapes that you get playing release fluids that eventually form a scab on your skin. The fluid contains good substances, but they also contain bad substances, like bacteria that will live on the skin. If a player's gear does not fit appropriately, abrasions may result that can come in contact with CA-MRSA and cause an infection.

Abrasions should be treated immediately to prevent any fluid from reaching sheets, pillows, clothing, or equipment. The first step to the prevention of CA-MRSA from getting into the body, is by keeping yourself clean and cleaning your hockey gear regularly. Showering and good hygiene also reduces the amount of total bacteria and CA-MRSA on the body.

Fresheners & Freshness

Careful of the Cover-Up

If you get teased because of how raunchy your feet are after a hockey game, be sure to follow these simple rules. After each and every game you play, hang your hockey skates to dry. You need to air them out so skates will dry and the smell will dissipate. This will prevent bacteria and fungi from forming in the boots of your hockey skates. Second, you should wash your gear with detergent right away. Do not wait for days to wash it. This will prevent the smell from sticking to your hockey uniform.

Once your equipment is dry, you can maintain the freshness of your hockey equipment between washings with a spray freshener. This will keep your gear smelling better longer between proper cleanings. You can also put fabric softener sheets in your bag after washing your bag and this will eliminate odors within the bag between washings.

Conclusion

Education is the Best Prevention

Because you cannot always wash your equipment, it is important to keep the hockey equipment clean. Take your equipment out of the bag after every use. Your hockey bag is meant to

transport your equipment and NEVER to store your equipment. It is important to completely dry your equipment.

It's important to make sure everyone on your team and organization is aware of the importance of proper cleaning, maintenance, and storage of equipment. "Prevention through education" is the best way to eliminate odor and infection. The more players and parents are aware of the causes of infection and bacteria, the easier they are to prevent.

Hockey associates can offer reminders players to get them into a routine. It's best to start this routine from the start of the season to keep equipment clean and to stay alert to the symptoms and signs of a CA-MRSA infection.

If gear is properly cared for, players will not only be at less of a risk for infection, they'll be more pleasant to be around!