

Healthy Travels

Winter/Spring 2008

Dengue Fever: A Re-emerging Threat

In recent years, many regions of the world have experienced the return of a once well-controlled viral disease known as dengue fever. Spread by the bite of a daytime-feeding mosquito named *Aedes aegypti*, this disease has reemerged as a threat to both indigenous populations and travelers alike.

Infections typically occur in tropical areas where the mosquito that spreads the disease thrives in urban and semi-urban environments. An increase in the number of cases has been reported worldwide to include parts of Central America, South America, the Caribbean, Africa, Australia, and South/Southeast Asia. Travelers infected with the dengue virus may experience only mild symptoms such as fever, headache, and malaise. Frequently infection results in

significant muscle and joint aches, nausea, vomiting, or a rash. In its most severe form, the virus causes a disease known as dengue hemorrhagic fever that can be fatal. Travelers experiencing symptoms of dengue fever should seek medical care. Since infection is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not helpful in treating the disease. However, trained healthcare providers can offer supportive care which may be beneficial if initiated early.

Currently there is no vaccine available that prevents dengue fever. The best way to prevent infection is through the use of DEET-containing mosquito repellents. Since *Aedes aegypti* prefers to feed during daylight hours, travelers should apply repellent throughout the day.

“Many regions of the world have experienced the return of a once well-controlled viral disease known as dengue fever”

Photo: *Aedes aegypti*, the mosquito most commonly associated with the spread of dengue fever



Motor Vehicle Safety a Priority Overseas

The leading cause of preventable deaths among international travelers is motor vehicle accidents. Despite this unfortunate trend, the dangers associated with driving while overseas are frequently overlooked. Travelers often fail to realize that driving in a different locale under unfamiliar conditions places them at increased risk of having an accident. Furthermore, fellow motorists in other parts of the world often drive erratically and at very high speeds, putting even the most cautious drivers at risk.

If you are planning on driving a motor vehicle while traveling abroad, take time beforehand to familiarize yourself with the road signs you will encounter. Always wear a seat belt and never drink alcohol before getting behind the wheel. If possible, avoid driving at night in rural areas where road conditions are often poor and lighting is inadequate. If you are using public transportation, caution is still necessary. Avoid riding overcrowded buses or vans. If you are a passenger in a taxi, tell the driver to slow down if necessary. As a pedestrian, always enter streets with caution—motorists may not stop to let you cross!

Most Common Injury-Related Deaths Among U.S. International Travelers*

1. Motor Vehicle Accident (27%)
2. Drowning (16%)
3. Homicide/Suicide (12%)
4. Poisoning (7%)

*Hargarten S et al, Ann Emerg Med, 1991. 20:622-626.

Tip: Stay aware of your surroundings when traveling. Motorists in other countries often drive erratically.

Rabies: A Continuing Risk to Travelers



Tip: Beware! Not all rabid animals appear vicious. Even animals that look harmless can carry rabies.

Rabies is a viral disease that affects the nervous system of infected animals and humans. While this disease is largely under control in the U.S., it continues to pose a threat in many parts of the world. Being aware of this risk should be a priority of every traveler.

Many different types of animals can transmit rabies including dogs, cats, skunks, raccoons, foxes, coyotes, monkeys and bats. Both domesticated and wild animals are capable of transmitting rabies. While dogs rarely cause infection in the U.S., they are a common source of rabies overseas. Certain activities, such as cave exploring, may also increase your likelihood of exposure. Parents should be aware that children often approach animals with little caution and may be at greater risk. Avoiding direct contact with animals is the best way to reduce your chances of acquiring this disease.

Fortunately, a vaccine is available to help prevent rabies transmission. Your travel clinic provider will decide whether a rabies vaccination is appropriate for you based on your length of travel, planned activities, and proximity to adequate medical care while abroad.

To be adequately protected, three doses of the vaccine must be given over a 3- to 4-week time period. If you believe your travel may put you at risk of acquiring rabies, be sure to schedule a travel clinic appointment well in advance of your departure date. This will give your provider enough time to administer the full vaccine regimen.

If you are bitten or scratched by an animal while traveling, wash the wound immediately with soap and water and seek medical care as soon as possible. Even if you received the vaccine prior to travel, it may be necessary to administer additional doses to be fully protected.

What Is Medical Evacuation Insurance?

International travelers are often careful to ensure their health insurance provides coverage for medical expenses incurred abroad. But what about costs associated with emergency medical transport? In a life-threatening situation, it is often necessary to transport ill travelers to the U.S. or to a nearby country with adequate medical facilities. This can cost tens of thousands of dollars but may not be covered by standard health insurance. Inexpensive medical evacuation insurance provides coverage for this costly expense.

Medical evacuation insurance is not needed by all travelers. Usually only individuals with chronic medical conditions or those traveling to isolated locations purchase policies. If you are interested, first check with your insurance provider to see if you are already covered. If you are not covered, there are a number of companies that offer policies at reasonable prices. The U.S. Department of State provides a list of medical evacuation insurance providers on its website (travel.state.gov/travel/tips/brochures/brochures_1215.html).

Recommendations for Pregnant Travelers

Pregnancy does not necessarily preclude someone from traveling overseas. However, extra caution should be taken if you are pregnant and planning a trip in the near future. Discuss any travel plans with your obstetrician. Talk to your travel clinic provider about vaccines and medications that are safe. If possible, schedule your travel during the second trimester when the risk of spontaneous abortion or preterm labor is lowest. Delay travel until after delivery when choosing places with scarce expert medical care or travel-related diseases such as malaria.



Knowing what to do if you need medical assistance is especially important for the pregnant traveler. Carry your obstetrician's telephone number and email address with you at all times. Contact the U.S. Embassy or Consulate overseas to obtain referrals for English-speaking doctors that can help you in an emergency (see page 4 for information about contacting a U.S. Embassy or Consulate). Become familiar with the signs and symptoms of a possible obstetrical emergency (e.g., vaginal bleeding, lower abdominal pain or cramping, a gush of fluid from the vagina, persistent headache, blurred vision, or ankle swelling). For the pregnant traveler, preparation and awareness are crucial.

Tip: Pregnant women should carry a copy of their medical records when traveling, including documentation of blood and Rh type.

Vaccines Offer Safe and Effective Protection

Many people are familiar with the routine vaccinations that are commonly administered within the U.S. However, international travelers are exposed to a variety of exotic infectious diseases that are not prevented by the typical vaccine regimen. Discuss with your travel clinic provider which vaccines are appropriate for your travel. Be sure to bring vaccination records to the travel clinic to assist in the process

Even though vaccines recommended for travel are administered less frequently,

all vaccines are tested using the same rigorous standards for safety and effectiveness. Side effects may occur with any vaccine, but are rarely severe enough to require medical attention. If you have questions about potential side effects, ask your travel clinic provider. Be prepared to discuss any past history of vaccine reactions or any chronic medical conditions. If you are pregnant or plan to become pregnant in the near future, be sure to tell your travel clinic provider.

What You Need to Know About Altitude Sickness

Altitude sickness is a common ailment of travelers that venture to high elevations. It typically occurs at elevations above 8,000 feet. While it is most commonly associated with mountain climbing and trekking, it can occur in individuals who are simply visiting tourist sites at high altitudes. Symptoms of altitude sickness include headache, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, fatigue, dizziness, and insomnia. More severe forms of the disease, such as High Altitude Cerebral Edema (HACE) and High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE), rarely occur but may be life threatening. The best way to treat altitude sickness is to descend to a lower elevation. To prevent altitude sickness, take time to acclimate at higher elevations prior to strenuous activity. Eat small meals that are high in carbohydrates. If possible, sleep at lower elevations. In addition, prophylactic medications are available that can help prevent the onset of altitude sickness in those traveling to higher elevations.



“To travel is to take a journey into yourself.”

- Danny Kaye.

Travel Medicine Clinic at Fort Myer



Are you planning on traveling internationally in the near future? If you are visiting a location in Africa, Asia, or Central/South America, an appointment at the travel medicine clinic can help you prepare for any disease risks you may encounter.

- The Family Health Center of Fort Myer (Rader Army Health Clinic) Travel Medicine Clinic is open on Tuesdays from 0900 to 1600.
- Appointments can be made by calling 703-696-3439.
- Schedule your appointment approximately 4-6 weeks prior to your departure date.
- Bring your medical records with you, including all prior vaccination records.

Fast Facts

- The vast majority of travel-related illnesses are preventable.
- You should visit the travel clinic 4-6 weeks before traveling to Africa, Asia, Central America, or South America.
- Vaccines are the safest, most effective means of preventing illness.
- Avoiding insect bites by using DEET-containing repellents is the only method of preventing some insect-borne diseases.
- One of the best ways to reduce the risk of illness while traveling is to wash your hands frequently.

Information Sources



Shoreland's Travel Health Online — www.tripprep.com

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

- Traveler's Health Website — www.cdc.gov/travel
- Travel Notice Website — www.cdc.gov/travel/notices.aspx

U.S. Department of State

- Travel & Business Website — www.state.gov/travelandbusiness
- Embassy & Consulate Website — usembassy.state.gov

World Health Organization Travel Website — www.who.int/topics/travel/en

International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers — www.iamat.org

International Society of Travel Medicine — www.istm.org

American Society of Tropical Medicine & Hygiene — www.astmh.org

U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine — <http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/>

Tip: Check out these websites for more information about staying healthy while traveling abroad.

Healthy Travels

Healthy Travels is a quarterly publication written by the residents of the NCC-WRAIR General Preventive Medicine Residency. The assertions contained herein are the personal views of the authors and are not to be construed as official. Although every effort is made to ensure statements are consistent with U.S. Army and COCOM disease control policies, the reader is referred to the appropriate headquarters' preventive medicine officer for definitive guidance and policy statements regarding official travel medicine requirements. Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited. Questions, comments and letters should be addressed to: Division of Preventive Medicine (MCMR-UWK), Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, ATTN: Residency Director, Silver Spring, MD 20910-7500

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