

## **INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL AND HEALTH TIPS:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Travel in tropical climate is not the same as found in temperate countries because of its abundant tropical forests, wildlife including viruses, bacteria as well as poisonous snakes and fishes. These present few problems to visitors except to those who are more adventurous travellers. Millions of travellers visited the tropical countries, but only few of them do experience such problems. Prior knowledge of the various problems in travelling to this region and the necessary precautions to be taken will minimize the risk of complications later on. The following materials are published for the benefit of “oversea travellers” in the interest of public safety.

### **A. RECENT OUTBREAKS OF SARS AND BIRD FLU:**

#### **SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME (SARS)**

The first cases of SARS were reported in mid-November 2002 in Guangdong Province, China and subsequently spread to Hanoi (Vietnam), Hong Kong, Singapore and Toronto (Canada) along the routes of international air travels. This typical pneumonia was transmitted from animals to human beings and had claimed many lives as there was no vaccine or treatment available at that time. According to WHO, the total cost of SARS was estimated in the region of US\$30 billions. No SARS cases were reported in early 2004.

#### **BIRD FLU**

Another recent outbreak of “Bird Flu” also known as “Avian Flu”. This virus was seen only in bird including chickens and ducks. The “bird flu” was first seen in humans in 1997 which claimed 18 lives in Hong Kong and is not so serious as SARS.

### **B. VIRAL INFECTIONS & MOSQUITOES CARRIERS:**

#### **ENCEPHALITIS**

There are several forms of disease including Japanese encephalitis, in short JE and is not heard of lately. JE is caused by Culex mosquitoes which carry virus that lives in pigs. This deadly disease is transmitted from pigs to humans by Culex mosquito carriers. Mosquito repellents or vaccinations act as a deterrent measure against JE. Recent virus outbreak in some Asian countries had caused grave concern to pig farms and travellers. The virus infection commonly attacks and causes swelling in the basal ganglia, cerebrum and brain stem which results in tissue destruction, leading to coma.

#### **CREEPING ERUPTION**

Some hookworm larvae are able to penetrate human skin. They may cause a syndrome known as creeping eruption characterized by itchy, red, moving worm-shaped trails, usually on the feet and legs. Larva currens produce a similar rash on the backside. The worms are usually contracted by walking barefoot on beaches fouled by dogs, or sitting in a wet bathing suit in areas contaminated by dog faeces.

### **DENGUE FEVER**

This virus is spread by the aedes mosquitos which breed on long stagnant water and is prevalent in recent times. Symptoms include high fever, headache, joint and muscle pains. There is no vaccine and the only prevention is mosquito repellent. Dengue is not uncommon and almost never fatal to young people in good health, but for older people or those with chronic debilities, hospitalization is advisable.

### **MALARIA**

Malaria is a parasite spread by anopheles mosquitoes. However, the best prevention is simply use a good mosquito repellent, avoid perfumes and scented after-shaves, wear light colored long-sleeved shirts, long pants and shoes. At night, sleep with air-conditioning or under a ceiling fan, mosquitoes do not like them. Symptoms include fever, chills, sweating, severe headache and abdominal pains. Malaria can be critical. If you have these symptoms, seek medical treatment.

### **LOCKJAW**

In medical term, lockjaw is known as “Tetanus”, is a bacterial disease and also a major cause of death in tropical countries. They pose no threat except in the presence of wounds. Once contracted, symptoms arise 7-14 days later. This disease is easily prevented, however, through immunization and by following careful hygiene. Wash out small wounds with hydrogen peroxide and in case of deep, dirty wounds or animal bites, go for an immunization booster shot. Beware of tattooing, ear piercing, chronic ulcers and ear infections, all of which are avenues for infection of tetanus.

### **C. CONTAMINATED FOODS & VIRUSES:**

Food poisoning probably afflicts the greatest number of people, mainly from intestinal infections resulting in mild diarrhoea. More serious viral infections are hepatitis, hemorrhagic fevers, or AIDS. Travellers coming from or going to rural areas need to beware of mosquito borne viruses like malaria and dengue fever.

### **DIARRHOEA**

Travellers require considerable care to avoid “diarrhoea.” If you do succumb to diarrhoea, its intensity will depend on how much contaminated food or drink you consumed. If you get the “runs” after eating lunch at one place, its not a good ideas to go back there again for dinner. Amongst the precautionary measures to be taken against diarrhoea are to avoid eating raw or uncooked food, such as salads or vegetables or drinking sugar cane juice from roadside or other unhygienic places. Should you get a persistent case of diarrhoea, remember to drink a lot of boiled water as dehydration is a particular problem. If children come down with diarrhoea, it can be very serious and a physician should be contacted to recommend rehydration salts. You should also contact a physician anytime you pass blood, have violent diarrhoea or vomiting, as these are symptomatic of haemorrhagic fevers like Cholera or Yellow Fever, and can be critical.

### **INTESTINAL WORMS**

Worms are contracted by eating contaminated food. Make certain your food is well-cooked, that there is no red left in the meats you eat, particularly with beef and pork. Lightly cooked or raw fish is a primary source of the Chinese Liver Fluke. Worms, live in their hosts for many years and left untreated, can cause anemia, really heavy infections can lead to cardiac arrest. There are several types of common worms, such as hookworm, roundworm, beef and pork tapeworms and hydatid cysts. Hydatid cysts are contracted by stroking dogs as the larval eggs adhere to the dog's fur. For hydatid cysts there is no reliable drug treatment, they must be surgically excised from the liver, if necessary. For the other worms, drug treatment is available and effective but requires a stool sample examination.

### **TYPHOID FEVER**

This acute infectious disease is characterized by high fever, spots and abdominal pain. It is caused by a bacillus ingested with food or water. Anyone with these symptoms is dangerously infected and should seek immediate medical help.

### **C. ANIMAL AND INSECT BITES:**

#### **DOG BITES**

Dog bites cause rabies but other animals and insects do pose a similar threat as well. The time interval of rabies between the first bite and onset is usually about two months but can vary from a few days to years. The initial symptom is itching, tingling, or pain at the site of the healed bite. This usually followed by headache, fever, spreading paralysis with episodes of confusion, hallucination or an inability to drink water. Fortunately the incubation period allows time for treatment, so if you are bitten by an animal, seek proper medical advice at once. Avoid stray dogs and beware of unusually tame behavior in wild animals because this is one of the early signs of animal disease. Pre-and post-exposure vaccinations are available.

#### **LIZARDS**

The large lizards seldom bite unless cornered. Smaller lizards are harmless. Leave the lizards alone if you see them and tell your children the same. You will need medical attention only if bitten, to check for signs of tetanus and diphtheria.

#### **SCORPIONS**

These are sometimes, though rarely, a danger. Scorpions are usually shy, but will react if they feel threatened. If you are stung, as with snakes, remain calm, immobilize the effected area and get to a physician as quickly as possible.

#### **SNAKEBITES**

When walking at night, especially in a suburban area of any city, or in rural areas always carry a flashlight, especially after heavy rains. When bitten by snake, try to stay calm, do not panic and immobilize the bitten limb as far as is practicable. Avoid harmful first aid measures and rush to a hospital as soon as possible.

However, the speed of the lethal effects of snake venom has been much exaggerated. A lethal dose of venom usually takes hours to kill rather than seconds. During this interval, seeking medical treatment from hospital is important.

#### **WASPS AND BEES**

About one person in two-hundred is severely allergic to bee or wasp venom. In such cases a bee sting can be serious. Those at risk will notice progressively serious and widespread reactions with each successive sting. If you are stung by a bee, scrap the stinger out with a knife or fingernail and avoid grasping the pouch as this will inject more venom. People who are severely allergic should carry an identifying tag in case they are found unconscious and should always carry equipment for self-administration of epinephrine and seek a medical doctor as soon as possible.

#### **TYPHUS**

All four varieties of typhus cause fever, headache and skin rash, but intensity of symptoms vary according to type. Mountain trekkers may be at higher risk. The disease is spread by biting mites that cling to scrub vegetation in secondary forest. Trekkers walking through the bush should wear a thick and mite repellent shoes. Effective treatment is available if started early enough in the illness; there is no vaccination. Many serious, life-threatening diseases are spread by insects. The careful travellers will always keep a good repellent nearby. Those who experience reactions should seek medical treatment.

#### **D. AIDS AND OTHER DISEASES:**

##### **SEXUALITY TRANSMITTED DISEASES (STD)**

The best way to avoid contracting either STD or AIDS is to avoid sex with strangers or use quality condom. Certainly, risk does not arise from prostitutes alone, suffice to say, engaging in unsafe sexual practices is risky. Signs of STD include vaginal and penile discharges and genital ulcers.

#### **TUBERCULOSIS**

TB in short, is common in Southeast Asia, although travellers are rarely at risk. A disease of contact with other people, it affects mainly those who work with sick people in refugee camps or hospitals. The tuberculosis is spread mostly by coughing and sometimes through unpasteurized milk. Symptoms include a prolonged cough, blood-tinged sputum, fever, night sweats, fatigue and weight loss. People with HIV are particularly susceptible. Travellers who believe they have been closely exposed to TB cases should seek medical treatment.

#### **VIRAL HEPATITIS**

There are six different types of Hepatitis. Hepatitis is a virus that affects the liver, causing its enlargement, sometimes resulting in liver failure. Symptoms include fever, chills, headache, fatigue, decreased appetite, tenderness in the upper right

abdomen, dark urine, light colored faeces and yellowed skin or eyes. If left untreated, victims can fall into a coma and die. The two most common forms are called Hepatitis A and B. Hepatitis A is spread through food and water contamination once again, undercooked or raw shellfish and seafood along with raw vegetables are the likely sources. Symptoms develop after one month. Hepatitis B is more serious than Hepatitis A, resulting in chronic liver disease. It is spread through blood transfer rather than by eating. This can happen during medical, surgical or dental procedures during immunization with improperly sterilized syringes, while being tattooed or sexual contact.

#### **E. WATER-SPORTS ACCIDENTS & SAFETY:**

##### **SCUBA DIVING**

Older, overweight or unfit divers, should have a medical check-up first including chest x-ray before undertaking such activity. If you have asthma, bronchitis, or heart attack or if you've ever suffered severe head injury or had chest surgery, you are probably unfit to dive. Diabetics must use special caution. Before getting on your next flight, refrain from scuba diving to a depth of more than 9 meters within three hours of boarding otherwise you may experience the bends while en route.

##### **SNORKELLING**

This is safe and fun, but avoid taking several deep breaths, or hyperventilating, before diving, you can blackout underwater. There are some species of fish and corals which are poisonous, especially the stone-fish. However, they are not aggressive unless provoked. It is alright to look but do not try to touch it. Avoid walking or standing on the corals on bare foot. Avoid swimming into sea urchins or jellyfish, but you may look at them and all around you as you swim ahead.

##### **SWIMMING**

The first thing to remember is, if you take hard drink, do not swim or vice versa and in fact almost half of all drowned occurred after alcohol consumption. Another important fact is that you cannot swim against the oncoming current of more than one knot per hour. During the rainy season, strong currents like this are common. Do not swim out past the breakers when there is a big surf, especially rainy season from May till November and do not swim when a red flag is flying as it is a warning of danger.

In conclusion, the author reiterates that the above tips are provided for general information only in the interest of public safety. The author wishes all travellers,

***“Have a Pleasant Holiday”.***

