

Media Release HEALTH ALERT

Thursday, 27 March 2008

Health alert warns all people going to the Pacific of Dengue fever risk

Outbreaks of Dengue fever in Tonga and New Caledonia have prompted a warning from the Auckland Regional Public Health Service (ARPHS) to anyone travelling to the Pacific. Travellers and Pacific peoples 'going home' for a visit are advised to take precautions to avoid mosquito bites.

Dengue is a serious viral disease spread by the bite of infected mosquitoes. It is spread by daytime feeding mosquitoes and there is currently no vaccine available. Infection with Dengue fever can cause a severe illness and that risk is higher in people who have repeated infection. It is important that people who make repeat trips to Dengue areas understand this risk.

Dr Doone Winnard, public health doctor, ARPHS says, "Importantly, while tourists may consider the risks of travel related illness, those returning to their Island homeland for family occasions and to visit friends also need to be aware of these new risks".

There are steps people can take to reduce the risk of getting Dengue fever. Dr Winnard recommends that, "People should wear clothes that cover their arms and legs, and apply insect repellent containing DEET (diethyl toluamide) to both skin and clothing. As well, staying in accommodation with screens on doors and windows or with air-conditioning will offer protection."

The symptoms of Dengue fever are sudden onset of a high fever and a severe headache. Those affected may also get a skin rash and muscle and joint pain. Symptoms usually start four to six days after being bitten by an infected mosquito but can take from three to 14 days to appear. The illness usually lasts only a short time but recovery may take some weeks.

Dr Winnard says anyone returning from overseas with symptoms of Dengue fever or feeling unwell should seek medical advice.

Dengue is found in tropical regions worldwide and regular outbreaks occur in various parts of the Pacific, highlighting the importance of precautions against mosquito bites for all travellers.

The outbreak in Tonga has mostly affected the main island of Tongatapu. Local authorities in Tonga are working hard on control programmes to limit the spread of the disease.

ARPHS reports that nationally 19 people have returned home with Dengue acquired in Tonga so far this year compared with four for the whole of last year. Of note 16 of these people were of Tongan ethnicity.

ARPHS is alerting services who work with Pacific peoples of the risks of Dengue in the Pacific in order to encourage preventive measures for those who are 'going home' for a visit.

Mosquitoes in New Zealand do not carry the Dengue virus and as the disease is not spread from person to person, people are only at risk when they go to countries where Dengue exists.

For more information people can contact Auckland Regional Public Health Service on 09 623 4600 or for questions and answers about Dengue Fever visit

http://www.arphs.govt.nz/Media_Releases/media_releases.asp

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