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Risk of Dengue Fever for Pacific peoples 'going home' for a visit

What is the concern about?

Dengue fever is a serious viral disease spread by the bite of infected mosquitoes. It is found in tropical places around the world and regular outbreaks occur in parts of the Pacific.

Last year there was an outbreak in the Cook Islands, next year it could be another Pacific nation; this year it is Tonga. Over 200 people have been sick and 3 people have died in recent months from Dengue in Tonga. In the past three months 19 people have returned from Tonga to New Zealand unwell with Dengue; 16 of these people were Tongan and most of them live in the Auckland region.

Local authorities in Tonga are working hard to limit the spread of Dengue by trying to reduce mosquito breeding and numbers. Travellers and Pacific peoples 'going home' for a visit need to take extra care to avoid mosquito bites.

How can people protect themselves from Dengue?

Dengue fever is spread by daytime feeding mosquitoes and there is currently no vaccine available. The risk of getting dengue can be reduced by avoiding mosquito bites by

- wearing clothing that covers the arms and legs
- wearing hats and shoes (rather than sandals)
- putting insect repellent on both skin and clothing. The most effective repellents are those containing diethyl toluamide (DEET)
- staying, when possible, in accommodation that has screens on doors and windows or is air-conditioned.

What happens if people get Dengue?

After being bitten by an infected mosquito, dengue fever starts about a week later. Affected people get a high fever, and a very bad headache. They may also get a skin rash, and bad muscle and joint pain. The illness usually doesn't last long (a week or so) but it can take weeks before the person is properly better. There are four types of Dengue virus, and in the future, if the person gets Dengue again with a different type, it may cause a severe illness with bleeding which needs admission to hospital and sometimes causes death.

What should people do if they think they have Dengue?

Drink plenty of fluids and seek medical advice. It is important that those who are ill with Dengue fever don't take aspirin or aspirin related drugs as these can make bleeding worse; paracetamol/panadol is safe to take.

How long do people need to stay concerned about catching Dengue?

People always need to be concerned about Dengue if they are going to countries where there are the kind of mosquitoes (Aedes mosquitoes) that can transmit Dengue.

Regular outbreaks of Dengue fever occur in various parts of the Pacific. Cases of Dengue reported in New Zealand have happened in people who have returned from all parts of Asia, Central and South America, Africa, and even Northern Queensland, as well as the Pacific.

What does it mean for the future if someone has had Dengue?

Because of the increased risk of serious Dengue (with bleeding) in the future for people who have already had Dengue, they need to be extra careful when travelling to countries where there is Dengue. For those going back to visit family and friends, extra care with regular use of insect repellents, protective clothing and if possible accommodation with mosquito screens is important.

Why is Auckland Regional Public Health Service involved?

Auckland Regional Public Health Service (ARPHS) investigates all reported cases of dengue fever in the Auckland area. This involves trying to find out where those people may have got Dengue Fever in order to prevent other people from becoming ill, and giving advice about care in the future to avoid repeat infection.

ARPHS also keeps an eye on numbers of people with Dengue from different areas so that we can alert people when they need to be extra careful, as is the case for Tonga at present.

Can we get Dengue in New Zealand?

Mosquitoes in New Zealand do not carry the dengue virus and as the disease is not transmitted from person to person, New Zealanders are only at risk when they travel to countries where Dengue is a problem.