What is malaria?

- Malaria is a serious and potentially life-threatening disease caused by a parasite.
- There are five different types of malaria parasite that affect humans. Plasmodium falciparum is the most dangerous type and can cause death in a short time, particularly in individuals with a weakened immune system.
- Plasmodium vivax and Plasmodium ovale can relapse from dormant liver stages.
- Untreated malaria can progress rapidly to severe and fatal infection.

Where does malaria occur?

- Each year, 350 - 500 million cases of malaria occur worldwide; more than 1 million infected people will die.
- Malaria occurs in over 100 countries, including large areas of Central and South America, Mexico, Hispaniola, Africa, the Middle East and Oceania.
- Always check with the International Travel Clinic before you travel, as the malaria scene worldwide is constantly changing.
- Factors that can impact on malaria are local weather conditions and mosquito protection control programs.

How does a person get malaria?

- Malaria is spread by the bite of an infected female Anopheles mosquito. This disease can also be spread through used syringes, through blood transfusions or by transfer from a mother to her fetus during pregnancy.
- Anopheles mosquitoes usually bite during low light times (e.g. at dusk, dawn and at night).
- The Anopheles mosquito breeds in bodies of shallow, stagnant water.
- Malaria is less common at higher altitudes, during dry seasons and among people who stay in air-conditioned or screened accommodations.
- Once an infected Anopheles mosquito bites a person, the parasite may lie dormant in the liver for 8 to 365 days, depending upon the type of malaria. During this time, a person may not feel sick.
- The parasites leave the liver and enter the red blood cells, burst the cells, and toxins are released that make the infected person feel sick.

What signs and symptoms can you have?

- If you experience recurring fever over 38 C for more than one hour, with or without chills, within 3 months after leaving a malarious country, this is a medical emergency.
- Flu-like symptoms such as headache, muscle pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fatigue, anemia, sore throat or cough.
- Cycles of shivering attacks, fever and sweating.
- Infection with Plasmodium falciparum malaria can cause kidney and liver failure, blood clotting problems, swelling of the lungs and brain, mental confusion, seizures, coma and death.
How can you help prevent malaria?
- Visit your International Travel Clinic several weeks before departure, for a risk assessment, information and a prescription for antimalarial drugs.
- Reduce your exposure to mosquitoes while traveling. Key personal protective measures include use of both insecticide treated clothing and bed nets, and personal insect repellants (see Mosquito Precautions handout).
- Begin anti-malarial drugs before you enter a malarious area, continue taking them while you are there and for a period of time after you leave the area. The clinic nurse will give you specific information along with your prescription.
- No anti-malarial drug gives complete protection. However, one of the advantages of taking antimalarials is that, if malaria does develop, its severity is usually reduced.
- If you need to stop this medication, it is important to replace it with an appropriate alternative.

Where do you go if you have malaria symptoms when you return home?

In Saskatchewan, present at Royal University Hospital emergency department. Tell them that you have been out of the country in a malarious area and need to be checked for malaria.

Where do you go if you have malaria symptoms while still travelling?
- Urgently seek medical advice if you develop fever while traveling after seven days in a malarious area. Present at an IAMAT centre or a clinic recommended by your insurance carrier.
- Request a blood film examination for malaria parasites. Remember, if the test is negative; have it repeated within 12-24 hours with 3 negative tests.
- Early diagnosis and prompt treatment increases a person’s survival rate.

How do you treat malaria?
- A doctor can prescribe drugs to treat malaria. The type of drugs and length of treatment depend on the type of malaria, age, the country visited and how ill the person is.

For more information, call the International Travel Centre at (306) 655-4780
www.saskatoonhealthregion.ca/internationaltravel

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