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What is malaria?

Malaria is an infection caused by mosquitoes, commonly by the type called Plasmodium Falciparum. It is the female type Anopheles mosquito that causes transmission. In South Africa, Malaria is common in North-eastern KwaZulu-Natal and low altitude areas of Mpumalanga and Limpopo, particularly those bordering Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Swaziland. It typically occurs between the months of September and May.

Malaria occurs in almost all countries in sub-Saharan Africa, except in Lesotho. It is also important to note that infected mosquitoes can be unintentionally transported to non-endemic areas, especially Gauteng.

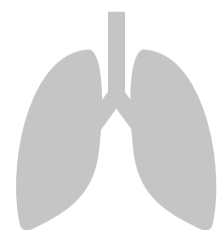


What are the symptoms?

Headache



Abdominal pain, diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting



Loss of appetite



Fever and chills



Joint and muscle pains



Fatigue



Questions

for Dr Thapelo Motshudi

1 Who is at risk?

Infection occurs following a mosquito bite and this is dependent on whether one has immunity or has taken tablets to prevent infection. The illness typically happens within 10 - 21 days of being bitten and sometimes within 7 days if early.

Since Malaria infects red blood cells, people born with some blood abnormalities are protected from its severe effects. Both males and females are equally affected, however pregnant patients with malaria are at increased risk of severe illness and death. In addition, non-immune mothers and those who are immune and pregnant for the 1st time are suspected to have increased risk of low birth weight, miscarriage and prematurity. Young children aged 6 months to 3 years who live in endemic areas are also at an increased risk of death.

2 How is it diagnosed?

Malaria is diagnosed by observing the parasites under a microscope. Further tests are performed to assess the number of clotting cells in the blood, kidney and liver function and sometimes fluid is removed from the spinal canal where meningitis is also suspected. In addition, a chest x-ray is often performed to ensure that the coughing is not due to pneumonia.

3 Preventative measures

- Avoid getting bitten
- Avoid the number of mosquitoes around you or completely eradicate them. Using nets treated with insecticides and spraying the insides of targeted houses are both very effective.
- Take antimalarial medication or prophylaxis when visiting an endemic area.

What is the treatment?

Once an infection has set in, a number of drugs are available for treatment, including some that are also used for prophylaxis. In severe cases medication is administered intravenously in a hospital. However, even with adequate treatment, 15% of children and 20% of adults who develop malaria of the brain will die. A vaccine for children is currently in the process of being developed and pilot projects were expected to commence in 2018. It is important to note that malaria is preventable and treatable. Homeopathic preparations or alternative remedies are not recommended in instances where malaria is confirmed or suspected because there is no evidence to demonstrate that they work or are safe.