

Chikungunya

Public health information sheet

Chikungunya is a disease caused by the bite of chikungunya-infected mosquitoes, which are present in many tropical countries. Chikungunya can cause severe joint pain and some people can become very sick from the disease.

The two mosquito species which carry the chikungunya virus are not found in New Zealand, meaning people can only be infected overseas. Over 40 different countries host mosquitos which carry chikungunya, including some in South-East Asia and the Pacific Islands. The best prevention is to avoid being bitten by mosquitos when overseas.

How is it spread?

People get chikungunya when they are bitten by a mosquito carrying the virus. Chikungunya cannot be spread from person-to-person, like a cold or the flu.

Symptoms

Chikungunya symptoms usually develop about seven to ten days after being bitten by an infected mosquito. The most common symptoms are:

- fever and joint pain
- headache
- muscle pain (myalgia)
- arthritis
- eye infections, causing swelling and redness (conjunctivitis)
- feeling or being sick
- rash (could look like red bumpy spots on the skin, usually on the body or limbs).

Most people recover and feel better within a week. However, some people may experience joint pain for many months after being infected.

If you develop chikungunya symptoms after travelling, seek health advice from your GP immediately or call Healthline for free anytime at 0800 611 116.

Treatment

There is no specific treatment for chikungunya. However, you can ease the symptoms of the illness by:

- drinking plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration
- getting plenty of bed rest
- taking pain relief such as paracetamol at recommended doses.

If you are taking medication for another condition, talk to your healthcare provider before taking additional medication. Do not take aspirin, ibuprofen or other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) until you have sought health advice to rule out dengue fever, which has symptoms similar to chikungunya. If you have dengue fever, aspirin or NSAIDs can increase your risk of bleeding.

People at higher risk

The people most at risk of becoming very sick from chikungunya include newborns bitten by mosquitos during childbirth, older adults (over the age of 65 years old), and people with underlying medical conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.

Prevention

There are currently no drugs available to prevent chikungunya. The main method of prevention is to minimise your risk of mosquito bites while overseas.

To avoid being bitten while inside it is best to:

- close screens on doors and windows
- apply insect spray
- use electric insect-repellent devices, or mosquito coils
- apply permethrin insecticide on clothes (permethrin can be bought at Travel Medicine Clinics)
- place a mosquito net over your bed at night – you can spray this with permethrin if you wish
- turn on air conditioning, if you have it – air conditioning is very effective at keeping mosquitoes out of a room.

To avoid being bitten while outdoors:

- wear a repellent cream or spray containing less than 35% diethyltoluamide (DEET) – high concentrations are not more effective and can be harmful. Products containing 20–25% picaridin or 30% lemon eucalyptus oil can also be used
- when using sunscreen, apply repellent over the top of sunscreen
- wear light-coloured protective clothing such as long-sleeved shirts, long pants and hats. You can also spray repellent on your clothes
- use zip-up screens on tents
- avoid places where mosquitoes are most active, such as swampy areas
- wear hats and shoes (rather than sandals).

You normally find more mosquitos around in the early morning and late afternoon, so it's important to be particularly careful during these times.

For more information

For more information, visit:

- www.arphs.health.nz/public-health-topics/disease-and-illness/chikungunya/

For health advice call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116 or contact your doctor.

For further advice on mosquito-borne illnesses and travel advice, visit

- www.safetravel.govt.nz.