

TRAVEL INFO: SKIN CARE, INSECT BITES AND STINGS

Wound infections are a frequent and often underestimated problem for travellers in developing countries.

General guidelines:

Insect bites that have been scratched open or untreated wounds and injuries are frequent. Minor wounds on the calf of the leg or the foot nearly always get infected (contamination with bacteria), particularly if no special attention is paid to them. It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that any wound, however minor, should be carefully cleaned, washed and disinfected. It is not unusual for an infected wound to take many weeks to heal, even with good care after return from a trip.

A potent antiseptic / disinfectant ointment is thus also a vital component in the minimum basic home medicine kit. Mercurochrome is totally unsatisfactory as an antiseptic / disinfectant. A mistake that is often made is the use of volatile antiseptics / disinfectants (e.g. alcohol), which do not provide any prolonged disinfection. The conventional adhesive plaster strip also often does not give sufficient protection, and its use is not advised for care of foot wounds. An antiseptic / disinfectant cream or ointment stays in place longer, preferably covered by a sterile gauze, changed once or twice a day. It must be emphasised that premature formation of a scab can permit pus formation and hence greatly delay wound healing. Only when the wound has become relatively painless can a scab be permitted to form. When despite good topical care the wound continues to enlarge, and certainly when the inflammation and the swelling increase around it, do not hesitate to start a suitable treatment with antibiotics (penicillinase-resistant penicillin such as oxacillin, cloxacillin, dicloxacillin and flucloxacillin).

In warm and humid areas the variety and number of insects is enormous. Mosquitoes, flies and other biting insects can cause a great deal of discomfort, not only because the bites elicit local reactions, but also because some insects transmit infections, such as malaria, dengue, leishmaniasis, sleeping sickness, etc. The local skin reactions usually diminish in proportion to the length of time spent in the tropics. Some people however develop hypersensitivity reactions.

The preventive measures against mosquito bites and the measures against tick bites also partly apply for other insects.

An antihistamine is useful for alleviating the symptoms of pruritus (itching). Great caution is advised when using antihistamine ointment on parts of the skin exposed to the sun, as photosensitization is very common. Some dermatologists recommend a potent corticosteroid-

based ointment for self-treatment of annoying allergic reactions, except on the face.

The larvae of certain flies use man as host. In Africa some flies lay their eggs on, among other things, laundry hung out to dry. The larvae subsequently burrow into the skin, in order to develop there. The lesion that they produce resembles a boil, which is more itchy than painful, and at its centre exhibits two black spots (respiratory pores) instead of yellow pus. Laundry that has been hung out to dry in the tropics is therefore best ironed with a hot iron in order to destroy larvae. In South America some fly larvae get directly on to the skin via mosquitoes. Such fly infestations are known as myiasis.

People who go about barefooted run a greater risk of insect bites, wounds and parasites that get into the body via the skin of the feet, such as ancylostomiasis, strongyloidosis, sand fleas and larva cutanea migrans.

The last-named are two typical skin parasitoses:

- tungiasis: after fertilization, the female of the sand flea or jigger (*Tunga penetrans*) penetrates the skin, especially on the feet and under the toenails. She burrows into the epidermis where she continues to grow and after a few weeks produces a pea-sized, initially itchy and then painful lesion resembling a boil but exhibiting a central black spot. Carefully peeling this from the epidermis with a needle or a sharp instrument permits, with a little practice, removal of the adult flea in its entirety. Subsequent disinfection of the wound is of the greatest importance.
- cutaneous larva migrans: this is caused by animal parasites that accidentally infect humans. These are usually hookworms from dogs or cats. The parasite can be present in mud, dirt or sand fouled with animal excrement. It burrows into the foot if you walk barefooted or other areas of exposed skin, which may come into contact with the beach or around swimming pools. These parasites usually die after penetration, though some survive and slowly migrate through the epidermis, thereby causing severe itching, serpiginous, eruptions, mostly on the hands and feet, and sometimes on the buttocks and thighs. This requires specific treatment.
- Other sources of irritation, mostly limited to local reactions of the skin, are divers species of mosquitoes, sand flies, lice, fleas, bedbugs, scabies mites, trombiculid mites, ticks, spiders, leeches and caterpillars with urticating hairs.
- If you get skin lesions caused by jellyfish, rinse the skin with vinegar (5-8% acetic acid). This applies especially for Australasia. A topical corticosteroid cream is then applied.