

Malaria protection is important for every traveller

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Dit is de omschrijving

The Institute of Tropical Medicine in Antwerp (ITM) is starting a new campaign to coincide with World Malaria Day (25 April). The campaign will inform people from malaria-infected regions about the risks of malaria when they go back and visit their native country. ITM physicians have noticed that travellers of African origin frequently underestimate the danger of contracting malaria.

Malaria is a life-threatening tropical infection that is transmitted by malaria mosquitoes. Every year the disease takes more than a half a million victims, primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa. Travellers can almost always prevent malaria if they take the appropriate precautions, such as mosquito repellent in combination with malaria pills.

In 2015, ITM's reference laboratory confirmed 272 cases of malaria among returning travellers (and this is an underestimation of the actual number), 21 of whom wound up at the Antwerp University Hospital. Nine out of 10 of these malaria cases were contracted in Africa.

ITM physicians have observed that malaria occurs most among migrants of African origin who return to their countries to visit friends or family. This target group is also called 'visiting friends and relatives'. They frequently don't really consider malaria to be a health risk and rarely consult a physician to find out about malaria prevention before they travel.

Dr. Lazare Manirankunda is a Burundian physician who works at ITM: "Africans in Belgium sometimes incorrectly think that people who were born in a malaria-infested region are 'immune' to the disease for their entire lives. I can assure you that if you are an African who has lived in Belgium for six months or more, you are just as vulnerable to malaria as any other Belgian. Speaking from experience with the African communities in Flanders, I know that there is often little information about malaria prevention and that symptoms of the disease are difficult to assess upon return to Belgium."

Everyone who travels to an area with malaria must be well-informed about the risk and the precautions that should be taken. Some people are more at risk of contracting malaria, or of having serious complications, than others: young children, pregnant women and people with a weakened immune system such as HIV/AIDS patients. Belgian travellers, including people of African origin, are more vulnerable to a malaria infection than the local population in Africa because they are not continuously exposed to the disease.

Malaria prevention consists of a combination of mosquito-repelling measures and – in areas with a high risk of malaria – preventive use of malaria pills ('chemoprophylaxis'). If done correctly, this combination of precautions provides 95% protection from malaria. If you become ill within 3 months of returning from a malaria-infested region, you should consider the possibility of malaria and consult a doctor. If correctly treated, a malaria infection will be cured completely. The folk wisdom of 'once malaria, always malaria' is a myth.

ITM physicians are trying to sensitise the 'visiting friends and relatives' group with a poster campaign in African churches, cafés, banquet halls, hair salons and stores, among others. They are also giving presentations during malaria prevention in the run-up to the summer holidays. The campaign, supported by the Flemish Agency for Care and Health, will continue throughout the spring and summer of 2016.

"Malaria is a serious disease and by every traveller going to regions where the disease is present must keep it in mind, but not everyone is aware of this. Physicians and pharmacists can be extra attentive by immediately broaching the subject of malaria prevention when they hear about someone's travel plans," said Dr. Ula Maniewski.

ITM does not solely focus on malaria in Belgian travellers. The Institute also conducts multidisciplinary research on the illness, covering the role of the parasite, the mosquito, medicines, the health system and human behaviour. Last month (March 2016), ITM researchers published the [results of the biggest](#)

[clinical study ever conducted on malaria in pregnant women in Africa](#). Malaria is also an important educational subject at ITM.

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