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Outdoors Travel Tips



Adventurer's Health Tips

Water Exposure, Fish Poisoning & Heatstroke

OCEAN AND RIVER TRAVEL

Fresh water exposures

River kayaking enthusiasts encounter frequent high-pressure water spray and roll over when they spill, thus exposing themselves to water microorganisms and small water insects. They are at risk of central nervous system infections with Naegleria and bacterial and parasitic gastro-intestinal infections. The greatest danger in this sporting activity is physical injury from the river bed, rocks and drowning. Travellers to Central and South America, the Middle East and Africa are at risk of contracting a parasitic infection called schistosomiasis particularly if they swim in lakes and rivers that have high level of infected snail population or ford rivers and streams and indulge in water-skiing and wind-surfing in fresh water areas. In the Amazon basin, several fish species, including piranhas and candiru can cause mutilating damage. Crocodiles and a large variety of water snakes also pose a health threat.

Salt water exposures

Tropical coral reefs, especially of the Indo-Pacific region, harbour the greatest number and diversity of venomous fish. Fish sting by impaling their aggressor on venomous spines which may form part of the dorsal and pectoral fins and gill covers or may be a separate appendage situated in front of the dorsal fins or on the tail.

Members of 5 families of fish have caused human death: sharks and dogfish, sting rays and mantas, catfish, weaverfish, scorpionfish and stargazers. Fish stings produce severe pain and swelling, vomiting, diarrhoea, sweating, fall in blood pressure and irregularities of heartbeat. For pain relief, the stung spine and membranes should be removed to prevent secondary bacterial infection.

Jellyfish, sea wasps, sea anemones and sea nettles belong to a group of animals called coelenterate. The tentacles of these brightly coloured animals are armed with stinging capsules (called nematocysts) which discharge when touched by a swimmer. Such contact can result in transient, burning discomfort and dermatitis.

Severe stings by the Portuguese man-of-war, Chiropsalmus of the Indian Ocean and Rhizostoma of the Atlantic causes vomiting, diarrhoea, generalised muscular cramps, paralysis of breathing muscles and fits. Treatment consists of removal of any tentacles after inactivating the toxins in the nematocysts with local application of alcohol, ammonia or even dry sand. Oral antihistamines and analgesics may also be given.

Fresh and shellfish poisoning

- a) **PARALYTIC & NEUROTOXIC SHELLFISH POISONING**
Cause: eating shellfish which ingested plankton with saxitoxin
Symptoms: vomiting, diarrhoea, nausea, slowing of heartbeat to the point of heart failure and muscle paralysis.
- b) **CIGUATERA POISONING**
Cause: coral reef fishes e.g. grouper, red snapper seabass which have accumulated ciguatoxin via the marine sea web.
Symptoms: abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea, muscle pains, headache, blurred vision, numbness and burning sensation of the extremities.
- c) **SCOMBROID FISH POISONING**
Cause: commonly contracted from fish of mackerel or tuna when not properly refrigerated or preserved.
Symptoms: nausea, vomiting diarrhoea abdominal cramps and generalised urticaria. Treatment is largely symptomatic.
- d) **PUFFER FISH POISONING**
A delicacy among Japanese, this fish contains a poison called tetrodotoxin. The dish is specially prepared by trained and licensed chefs in Japan. It is important to recognise and avoid eating the fish. Ingestion of the poison causes paralysis of muscles resulting in difficulty breathing, drowsiness, convulsions and eventually death. No specific treatment.

DESERT (HIGH TEMPERATURE) TRAVEL

Skin protection

Sun burn can be avoided by using tropical PABA-containing ultraviolet light-blocking agents and by avoiding sunlight in the middle of the day.

Heat syndrome

Caused by excessive loss of body water, electrolyte depletion or both. Symptoms like headache, nausea, vomiting, light-headedness, malaise and muscle pains.

HEAT EXHAUSTION

Treat with shade, water sprinkling, fanning and ice packs to head, neck, armpits and groin.

HEAT STROKE

Caused by impairment of the heat-regulating mechanism of the body. Shivering diminishes as the body temperature rises. Victims are confused, uncoordinated and lapse into coma. This is a medical emergency. It is treated by immediately cooling by removing all clothing, covering with wetted sheets or towels, fanning to promote cooling by evaporation and rehydration.

