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Health Protection Agency Issues Reminder To Holidaymakers Over Malaria

The Health Protection Agency has issued a reminder to travellers that it is essential to begin a course of preventative malaria treatment before travelling to countries where the disease is rife.

Malaria is commonplace in Africa, Central and South America and parts of Asia and the Middle East. The risk is particularly great in most of Africa. It is vitally important that visitors to these countries from the UK begin to take preventive treatment before travelling, continue it regularly throughout their holiday and for the recommended period after return.

The warning has been issued after five people who booked last-minute holidays to The Gambia returned with malaria. All five required hospital treatment, although four have now been allowed home. The fifth is recovering in hospital.

Three of the holidaymakers travelled without taking recommended preventive medication for malaria. The other two took an over-the-counter anti-malarial medication which, on its own, was not sufficient to prevent the onset of infection.

All of these patients had travelled to The Gambia on last minute holiday deals. Two had travelled together and the others independently.

Professor David Bradley of the HPA Malaria Reference Laboratory said: "Five cases of malaria from one site over a brief period among last-minute travellers points to a specific problem. We want to remind travellers, and also their travel agents, particularly those booking last minute deals, that travellers must seek urgent advice from their GP or a travel clinic about medicines to prevent malaria before they travel. For Africa the medicines require a prescription. Some can be started as late as the day before departure, and it is better to start the medicines late than not at all."

Each year in the UK there are around 2,000 cases of travel-associated malaria and 10 deaths, and most of these are preventable if people take the recommended medication prior to travelling, during their stay abroad and for a period after returning. In addition, simple measures, such as wearing insect repellent and suitable clothing and sleeping under an insecticide-treated mosquito net (unless in a sprayed and air conditioned bedroom) are also highly effective and add enormously to the benefits of drug protection.

Prof. Bradley concluded: "When planning your trip to countries where there is a risk of malaria, even if it's at the last minute, check that your preventive medication is up-to-date and relevant for the area you are visiting and take it meticulously."

Notes to Editors:

1. Malaria is a preventable parasitic disease transmitted by mosquitoes. It is predominantly a disease affecting Africa, South and Central America, Asia, Oceania and the Middle East. The symptoms include a flu-like illness, fever, shaking, headache, muscle aches and tiredness. Nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea may also occur. If travellers develop these symptoms whilst abroad or up to one year after returning, they should seek prompt medical advice and tell their doctor they have been in an area where malaria is a hazard.
2. The risk is particularly great in Africa, south of the Sahara, where over 95% of the potentially lethal falciparum malaria seen in the UK is contracted. The appropriate preventative medicines for most of Africa require a doctor's prescription and cannot be bought over the counter at a pharmacy.
3. The risks posed by malaria in some countries change over time so the treatment used in the past for these countries may not be the most appropriate today.
4. The HPA has recently published new guidelines on the prevention of malaria in travellers at www.hpa.org.uk/infection/topics_az/malaria/guidelines.htm
5. Advice on travel medication and vaccinations is available from NHS Direct on 0845 4647. Information sheets on insect bite avoidance is available on the National Travel Health Network and Centre (NaTHNaC) website <http://www.nathnac.org/travellers/iba.html>
6. Health professionals who require assistance and more specialist advice when advising travelers should contact the HPA Malaria Reference Laboratory or the National Travel Health Network and Centre. A telephone number with information for the public about anti-malarial treatment (recorded message) is available on 09065 508 908.