

# Leishmaniasis

## What is leishmaniasis?

Leishmaniasis is caused by a protozoan parasite.

## How is it spread?

It is transmitted by the bite of the female sand fly and causes several clinical syndromes in humans. There are two major clinical types:

- cutaneous leishmaniasis
- visceral leishmaniasis.

Mammals, including dogs, foxes and rodents, are the usual reservoirs for leishmaniasis rather than humans.

## Where is leishmaniasis found?

The organism is found in approximately 90 countries around the world, including tropical Africa, South America, central and East Asia and southern Europe.

Sand flies are usually found in forests, the cracks of stone or mud walls, or animal burrows. The sand fly predominantly bites between dusk and dawn and usually stays close to the ground.

The sand fly transmits the protozoa to a human whilst it bites.

In rare cases visceral leishmaniasis has been transmitted from mother to baby or via blood transfusion.

## Leishmaniasis risk in UK Travellers:

Cutaneous leishmaniasis is occasionally seen in adventure travellers, missionaries and soldiers who travel to areas of risk, particularly in those to rural areas, where sand flies may inhabit.

Visceral leishmaniasis is rare in tourists. Those who are immuno-compromised are at greater risk of clinical illness with visceral leishmaniasis.

## Signs and Symptoms:

Cutaneous leishmaniasis presents as skin lesions (often an ulcer) that develop weeks or months after infection. If left untreated these sores persist for several weeks to months.

Visceral leishmaniasis may not cause any symptoms. Those causing clinical symptoms follow a variable time course. After an incubation period of weeks or months; life-threatening disease may develop with symptoms of fever, enlarged spleen, and anaemia.

Diagnosis is made by taking a biopsy sample of the lesion or other tissue sample and finding the parasite.

## Treatment:

Patients should be referred to a specialist tropical disease unit for diagnosis and treatment of leishmaniasis. There are several drug treatments available including oral and injectable medications. These should be discussed with the specialist.

## Prevention:

There is no vaccine available for leishmaniasis. Travellers should be advised on the need for insect bite avoidance measures, particularly between dusk and dawn.

Sand flies usually stay close to the ground, so sleeping in hammocks may reduce the risk of bites. Sand flies are small enough to pass through a standard mosquito net, but are less likely to do so if the net is impregnated with permethrin.

Speak to your travel health advisor about how to avoid insect bites.