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## Information and advice for travellers

# Schistosomiasis

### What is it?

Schistosomiasis (aka Bilharzia) is a parasitic disease caused by flukes (trematodes). Globally it is estimated to affect 140 million people and caused 200 000 deaths each year.

### Where can I catch it?

African, South American, Caribbean, Middle Eastern and Asian countries. Map at:

[https://www.cdc.gov/travel-static/yellowbook/2020/map\\_4-11.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/travel-static/yellowbook/2020/map_4-11.pdf)

### Is it dangerous?

Yes but for differing reasons. Although many people initially have no symptoms, some will develop an acute illness called Katayama syndrome within a few weeks of infection. This can be life threatening without appropriate treatment.

Schistosomiasis can also become a permanent (chronic) parasitic infection. It can then cause many different long term health consequences including kidney failure, infertility, gastrointestinal bleeding and bladder, liver and gallbladder cancer.

### How do I catch it?

Schistosomiasis parasites have a complex life cycle. From infected humans they pass to fresh water snails via human faeces and urine. In turn they pass back to humans when cercaria are released from the snails. These cercaria can cross into humans through intact skin and mucosal membranes.

Humans are therefore infected by exposure to water containing schistosomiasis cercaria. This can be when washing, wading, bathing or swimming in affected waterways (lakes, ponds, rivers etc)



### What are the symptoms?

Most people have no early symptoms. Some people develop a rash early after infection. Some people develop high fever, cough and muscle ache in the 1 – 2 months following infection.

### How do I avoid it?

The most effective way to prevent schistosomiasis infection is to avoid exposure to the infecting cercaria. Avoid wading, swimming or bathing in fresh water bodies in countries where schistosomiasis occurs.

Remember drinking water and bathing water in sanitation blocks / bathrooms may also be affected. Boiling drinking water for a minimum of 1 minute before consumption will kill all known bacteria, viruses and parasites.

Note that chemical treatment of drinking water is not 100% effective against waterborn parasites.

Brisk towel drying after bathing and use of DEET are ineffective in preventing disease.

### What if I catch it?

Do not panic. If you become acutely unwell (e.g. fever, muscle aches or cough) then seek medical advice immediately. Acute illness can develop in the first few months after infection. However most people do not develop any acute symptoms, but chronic infection can still occur. If you think you could have been exposed then seek medical advice on your return. You can be screened for infection and if required medication used to clear the infection.