

Understanding Dengue Fever



Dengue is a viral illness that is spread by the bite of infected mosquitoes. It's also called dengue fever. There are mild and moderate to severe forms of dengue. The mild form is the most common. The severe form is called dengue hemorrhagic fever (DHF). Without treatment, DHF may cause death.

How to say it

DEHN-gee

What causes dengue?

The virus is spread by Aedes mosquitoes. You can get the virus if you are bitten by an infected mosquito. The mosquitoes spread the virus by biting a person with dengue and then biting another person. The mosquitoes live all over the Western Hemisphere. Dengue is uncommon in most of the U.S., except Puerto Rico, Guam, and American Samoa. It's most common in tropical areas such as the Caribbean, Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Pacific Islands.

Symptoms of dengue

Mild dengue infection may have a few symptoms such as fever, malaise (a general feeling of being unwell), headache, nausea, rash, and body aches. Moderate to severe dengue has three phases: febrile, critical, and recovery.

Febrile phase

Symptoms of the febrile phase last 3 to 7 days and include:

- Sudden high fever
- Skin rash or red patches on the skin
- Severe headache
- Pain behind the eyes
- Severe joint and muscle pain
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- Nausea and vomiting
- Easy bruising and bleeding

Critical phase

The critical phase often lasts 2 to 3 days. During this time, body temperature may return to normal. Symptoms of the critical phase include:

- Vomiting that won't stop
- Severe pain in the belly (abdomen)
- Difficulty breathing

- Fast breathing
- Low blood pressure leading to dizziness or fainting
- Bleeding

A person with severe dengue may have trouble breathing, severe bleeding, damage to organs, or dengue shock syndrome. This can be fatal and is a medical emergency.

Recovery phase

During the recovery phase, there is overall improvement. There may also be a rash and itchy skin. There may be heart and lung problems.

Diagnosing and treating dengue

See your healthcare provider if you have a fever or other symptoms within 2 weeks of returning from travel to an area where dengue occurs. Tell your provider where and when you traveled. Your provider can diagnose dengue fever with a blood test to check for the virus or antibodies in your blood. The blood test can also check for low platelet levels, which can increase the risk of bleeding.

If you have dengue fever, your treatment will depend on how severe your illness is. Symptoms are most often treated with bed rest and fluids. You may be given acetaminophen to reduce fever and pain. Don't take aspirin, ibuprofen, or naproxen. They may increase your risk of bleeding. Severe dengue may require hospitalization. You may need IV medicines and fluids. A blood transfusion may be needed in case of severe blood loss.

Preventing dengue

There is no vaccine for dengue fever for U.S. travelers who are visiting but not living in a dengue-endemic area. An FDA-approved vaccine is available only for people ages 9 through 16 who have previous dengue fever confirmed by a lab and who live in areas where dengue fever is common.

The best protection is to prevent mosquito bites. If you are traveling to an area where dengue fever is a risk:

- Use insect repellent that has 20% to 30% DEET on your skin and clothing
- Stay in indoor areas that have screens or air conditioning
- Use spray insecticide outdoors
- Put a mosquito net around your bed
- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long trousers

Call 911

Call 911 if you have any of these symptoms:

- Severe belly pain
- Vomiting that won't stop
- Blood in your vomit or vomit that looks like coffee grounds
- Red patches on your skin
- Bleeding from your nose or gums
- Black, sticky stools

- Pale, cold skin
- Trouble breathing

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