

Feature Article

If You're Planning a Trip to Central or Eastern Europe, You Need to Pay Attention

Plane tickets...check. Passport...check. Sunscreen...check. TBE vaccine...you still have time. For those Canadians planning a trip to Central or Eastern Europe, two weeks notice is all you need to receive a vaccine that could potentially save your life.

According to Dr. Jay Keystone, a travel medicine specialist with Medisys Travel Health Clinic, and the Tropical Disease Unit at Toronto General Hospital in Toronto, Ontario, "Tick-Borne Encephalitis (TBE) is a dangerous infection that is transmitted by the bite of an infected tick and contact time takes just one tenth of a second. Almost 1 per cent of people who acquire the infection could die and 30-50 per cent could develop permanent or prolonged neurological damage."

TBE is endemic in parts of 27 European countries and prevalence is particularly high in regions of Austria, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, Poland, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus and the Ukraine. "With 10,000 cases reported each year, TBE has increased in Europe by almost 400 per cent in the last 30 years," adds Dr. Keystone.

Why haven't we heard of TBE?

According to Dr. Keystone, the reasons are simple. We didn't have a licensed vaccine in Canada to prevent it and Canadian travel to rural areas of Central Europe has now started increasing.

Who is at risk of contracting TBE?

"Canadians who are travelling to Central and Eastern Europe, especially if they are going to be doing outdoor activities." At-risk activities include hiking, biking, camping or picnicking in grasslands or woodlands. "All of these activities put you at risk of getting TBE because all of these activities put you at risk of getting a tick bite," notes Dr. Keystone. TBE can also be contracted by consuming unpasteurized milk or milk products in endemic regions.

The bad news is that once contracted, there is no known treatment for someone infected with TBE. However, preventative measures are available.

"TBE can be prevented by using precautions to prevent tick bites and by getting vaccinated. Immunization builds up specific antibodies which fight the infection caused by the bite of an infected tick," adds Dr. Keystone. "The vaccine can also be given to the last minute traveller. Two doses of vaccine over two weeks gives almost 100 per cent protection."

There are other precautions travellers can take:

- Avoid tick-infested areas
- Wear light coloured, long-sleeved clothes that are tight at the wrists and ankles
- Wear shoes that cover the whole foot
- Apply insect repellent
- Remove ticks with tweezers, pull the tick away from the skin without rotation

Travellers should contact their physician or local travel clinic for information on immunization. More information is available for travellers at www.tbefacts.com or by calling the FSME-IMMUN Support Program at **1-877-211-3582**.