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OCT 08 2015



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Press Release No. 2015-081

LEPTOSPIROSIS ON GUAM - A PLACE AND SEASON DISEASE

On September 13, 2014, the Guam Fire Department received a 911 call reporting lost hikers in the Mount Schroeder area of the Merizo district of southern Guam. Members of a local Hashers club ("hashers" have been described as drinking clubs with a running problem) had set out that afternoon at about 4:00 p.m. to follow a trail through a wilderness area of southern Guam. One runner had fallen into a ravine, three additional runners had minor injuries, and about 25 were apparently missing. Rescue operations lasted until 4:24 a.m. by which time 79 hashers had been led to safety and all were apparently accounted for. None of the participants had to be hospitalized for their injuries.

This was an apparently happy conclusion to what could have been a tragic event but over the next several weeks at least 10 participants were diagnosed with leptospirosis. Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease of mammals and is spread through contact with their urine. The time between a person's exposure to a contaminated source and becoming sick may vary from 2 days to 4 weeks. Illness usually begins abruptly with fever and other symptoms that may include chills, headache, muscle aches, vomiting, or diarrhea. The patient may recover for a time but become ill again. If a second phase occurs, it is likely to be more severe than the first and the person may have kidney or liver failure or meningitis. This phase is also called Weil's disease. The illness lasts from a few days to 3 weeks or longer. Without treatment, recovery may take several months or the disease may prove to be fatal.

This was not the first time that an outbreak of this nature has occurred on Guam. In July of 2000 a multi-sport "Extreme-Adventure" event (segments included running, bicycling, swimming and kayaking) was held on Guam. One hundred-five race participants were officially registered for the race which also covered parts of southern Guam. Within several days of the finish a number of participants complained of being ill and several were confirmed to have contracted leptospirosis. When comparing the histories of all ill and not-ill race participants, the risk factors associated with illness were wearing short pants (participant likely to obtain lacerations from saw grass or rocks along the running route) and swimming with head submerged or swallowing water in the Fena river system.

So far this year a single case of leptospirosis has been reported to Guam Public Health. In this case the individual had been swimming at the Tarzan Falls. The wild areas of southern Guam offer scenic vistas and hiking there can be an enjoyable pastime but this area is also home to feral water buffalo and deer. Contamination left by wildlife is likely to be washed off

land surfaces during Guam's July through November rainy season to contaminate local rivers as is evidenced by their change of color from blue to brown. To prevent contracting leptospirosis, hikers should avoid swimming in Guam's rivers during the rainy season or, if the temptation is too great, reduce the risk of infection with *Leptospira* bacteria by avoiding swallowing water or getting water in their eyes or nose.



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