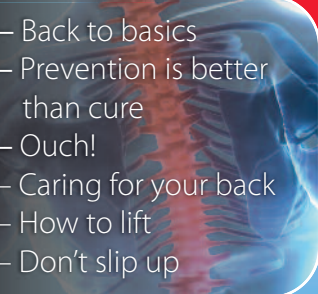



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Rapid response

Dear Seafarer,

In this edition we are seeking to raise awareness about looking after your own health, as well as the health of your fellow seafarers. Your quick reaction in an emergency could help to save a life, whether your own or that of a workmate.

The spinal column carries the entire weight of the torso. The bones in the lower part of the spine, known as the lumbar region, bear the most weight and are particularly prone to degradation and injury. As we age the spine deteriorates. Therefore greater care when lifting heavy or cumbersome objects can avoid debilitating back pain that might cause permanent disability.

In previous issues of Health Watch we have highlighted the steps that can be taken to avoid heart conditions. There is a high incidence of heart disease amongst seafarers. Knowing how to recognise the symptoms of a heart attack or stroke may save a life. If you have a medical condition which is controlled by medication, such as hypertension, it is vital to ensure that you

take your medication as prescribed by your doctor and that you have a sufficient supply for the duration of your time on board ship. Don't think that because you feel okay you don't need to take the medication. Making that mistake can have fatal consequences!

While on the subject of medication, if your ship is sailing to a country where malaria is known to be prevalent, please ensure that you take anti-malaria drugs. It is usually recommended that you take the drugs several days before you visit the country, so as to build up an immunity to the disease and also following your visit to the country. The recommended dosage will appear on the packaging. Also, it is extremely important that you only take drugs that have been provided by a legitimate supplier as counterfeit drugs are available and the consequences of taking fake drugs can be life threatening.

As always, any questions about any of the subjects covered in this edition of Health Watch should be sent by e-mail to the address on the back page.



Back to basics

Your back is the foundation that keeps your body together but without proper care it can be so easy to damage or put strain on this vital part of your body. Back pain can be an extremely disabling disorder, making it difficult to work and among seafarers lower back pain and associated neck and shoulder pain is common.

Prevention is better than cure

Your posture when sitting, standing, lying down and lifting can play a vital role in your back health so you should learn how to sit, stand and lift goods properly in order to avoid injury. It is important not to put additional pressure on your back and also to keep it strong – regular exercise such as yoga and pilates can help with this.



Ouch!

Chronic back pain is found in the lower back (lumbar region) and can spread to the legs, groin and buttocks. The pain can be caused by injuries from trips and falls or by pressure and stress put on the muscles and ligaments which support the spine.

Frequent bending and twisting, awkward working positions and repetitive body movements can all put a strain on the back. Manual labour, carrying and handling goods are common causes of pain in this area. In addition, standing or sitting in an awkward position for a long period, or even holding your breath when lifting can put excess strain

on the back, as can vibrations in the workplace. Obesity is also an important factor as this puts extra pressure on the back and leg joints.

Back pain can build up slowly over time or it can come on quite suddenly, after having pulled a muscle or ligament. Along with back pain, symptoms such as numbness in the legs, a high temperature, unsteadiness, pain in the legs, swelling of the back, or bladder and bowel problems can signal something more serious, such as a slipped or prolapsed disc or damaged vertebrae or an arthritic condition.



However, back pain is not usually caused by a serious disease and people often recover from it within 12 weeks.



How to lift

- + With your feet shoulder width apart, bend your knees and keep your back straight
- + Tighten your stomach muscles, lift the object close to your body and use your leg muscles
- + Keep your eyes up, don't twist or bend
- + To put the object down, lower your body by bending your knees, not your back
- + Never bend your back to pick something up as this could seriously injure you

Caring for your back

Back pain can usually be treated by taking painkillers and by being mobile. Keeping as active as possible and continuing with daily tasks is important as most experts agree that remaining inactive for long periods of time can exacerbate back pain, so moderate regular activity will assist with recovery.

Hot or cold compression packs will also help (alternatively, a hot water bottle or bag of frozen vegetables will do). If you have extreme back pain, this can make your life

difficult but try and stay cheerful as research shows that people who keep positive can recover more quickly than those who get depressed.

For frequent back pain, speak to medical staff about the possibility of receiving physiotherapy or osteopathy. If your back pain is chronic (has lasted for over six weeks), treatment can include a combination of painkillers and acupuncture or exercise classes.

Don't slip up

Slips and trips in the workplace are preventable but can be a major cause of back injuries. To help prevent slips and trips, here are some simple steps you can take:

- + Make sure your actions don't lead to someone getting injured – could your decisions mean the difference between a fellow seafarer slipping or not? If you see a hazard or a spillage, don't just walk on by, take action – clear it up or if it's too dangerous to approach, report it.
- + Wearing proper footwear with slip resistant soles can make a huge difference in reducing the risk of slipping or falling.

- + Follow proper working procedures – make sure you perform a risk assessment before doing risky tasks. Also, proper use of equipment such as ladders and tools will help protect you from accidents.
- + Take extra care when working from heights and always be extremely vigilant if you are going to work in a part of the ship which is difficult to access – injuries and deaths in enclosed spaces are unfortunate and happen all too often on board. A slip or trip in such an area could end in tragedy if no one knows where you are, so always follow best practice and risk assessment protocol for such tasks.



CUTTING THE FLOW

When the surface of the skin is broken by a cut or wound, this can lead to blood loss but can also allow unwanted germs to enter the bloodstream. For minor wounds, the most important thing is to prevent infection, whereas with severe wounds, it is vital to try and prevent further blood loss and lessen the risk of shock for the patient.

In order to help a fellow seafarer with a wound, it is good practice to investigate the cause of injury – bruising could suggest a underlying injury or more significant condition, including internal bleeding. It is also important to ensure you protect the

patient, and yourself, from any risk of further infection by practicing good hygiene – for example, medical gloves are a good method of protecting yourself from infections carried in the blood.

For minor cuts, you can help a fellow seafarer by putting on disposable gloves and then cleaning the cut under running water, patting it dry with a clean dressing, then raising the affected part of the body. The surrounding area can then be cleaned (using soap and water) and patted dry before using a dressing or plaster to cover the cut.



BUZZ OFF

Insect stings from bees, hornets and wasps are not always serious, unless the victim suffers an allergic reaction, but they can be quite painful. If someone on board suffers from a sting, you can help treat them, first by helping to calm them from the shock.

The affected area will look sore and may swell and if the sting itself is still there, you can brush or scrape it off with a (clean!) flat surface, such as a butter knife. Tweezers can make more poison enter the body.

You can also use a cold compress, such as an ice pack and apply this to the site for around 10 minutes and it can also be helpful to raise the affected limb in the air.

It's important to seek medical advice immediately if the victim has breathing difficulties, develops a rash, or suffers swelling to the mouth or lips, face, neck or tongue, because this could be the sign of a serious allergic reaction. In addition, stings to the mouth or throat can create difficulties because swelling here could cause breathing difficulties.

BREAKING POINT

If someone on board suffers a bone fracture, this can be extremely painful but you can help them. Some key signs of fractures include unnatural joint movements or an inability to move a joint, a loss of strength in a limb, deformity or a twisting or bending of the limb. Patients can also feel a 'grating' feeling or noise and may go into shock.

You can help someone with a fracture by supporting the injured limb for them and immobilising the affected area. If the patient goes into shock, you can assist by lying him down on the floor (so long as it is safe to do so) and raising his legs (with support from a chair or cushions underneath the legs). If the patient is wearing tight clothing this should be loosened and it is also very important to keep the patient warm by placing a blanket over him.

Burning issues

Seafarers are vulnerable to many accidents and injuries while carrying out their duties but among the most potentially serious are severe burns.

Often the initial response by the first responders will have a major influence on the outcome for that patient for the rest of their life.

Burns can come from a wide range of sources such as engines and even the sun, with the most common causes being steam leaks, hot oil leaks, hot metal surfaces, explosions, electric shock and chemicals.

Here are the first steps you should take when dealing with a burn victim:

1. Use personal protective eye equipment and gloves when arriving on the scene and when providing first aid.

2. Survey the scene, in case there is still a risk to the responder, such as electrocution.

3. Once the area has been cleared and it is considered safe to enter, assess the victim for ABC - airway, breathing and circulation - and if a cardiac arrest has occurred from electrocution or smoke inhalation, the necessary resuscitation method can be started and an external defibrillator called for.

4. When circulation and breathing has been re-established, attention can then be turned to the burns and any other injuries.

5. Material contaminated with blood or fluid from the victim should be placed in a bio-hazard bag and the site cleaned according to the ship's blood-borne pathogen policy. Smouldering clothes, contaminated or external materials should be cleared from the wound area to prevent further injury.

6. Cool the area. You can initially place a scalded hand or foot in water cooled with ice or apply cool compresses to small partial thickness burns. However, do not do this with victims of large burns as they may become chilled or hypothermic.

7. As infection is the most common complication, triple-antibiotic ointment is an excellent and inexpensive balm to apply to burns of all sizes. Rinsing with tap water or sterile saline solution from the medical kit is also very helpful.



Beware fake medicines

Do you know if the medicines you are taking are the real deal? They could be part of the growing number of counterfeit drugs which are flooding the worldwide healthcare market.

The problem has now reached epidemic proportions and has even led to many deaths in places like Africa where malaria is rife and proper treatment is absolutely crucial to save lives.

Most of the counterfeit drugs are coming from Asia, with the producers making them in backstreet sheds. The danger is not only that the counterfeit medicines might not contain any active ingredients, they could also contain bad quality ingredients or the wrong dosage or simply be made in the wrong way.

Initially, counterfeiters were producing only a few specific products - mainly cancer treatments - but they have now moved on to copying other products and even inhalers, which are on most ships.

The danger, too, is that the counterfeiters are becoming cleverer with packaging and are even putting holographic seals on the packets.

Here are some tips to help you recognise a counterfeit medicine:

- + Read the wording carefully. Are the label and patient information in a language you understand? A tell-tale sign can be misspelled words.
- + Look closely at the packaging. The lettering may be hazy and printed flat, rather than raised, or the expiry date could be missing.
- + Use your senses. Is the medicine the same shape, size, texture, colour and taste as your previous prescription?
- + Feel for consistency. If the drug falls apart easily when you handle it, it could signal a fake.
- + Do a price check (if applicable). Does the cost seem very cheap in comparison with your official provider? If so, it could be counterfeit.



Daily dosage

If you are taking medication for an existing condition it might be tempting to stop taking your tablets if you are feeling better, but you must keep taking your medication for as long as your doctor recommends, otherwise you could make your medical problems much worse.

As noted in Health Watch Volume 1, Issue 3 - medical kits on board should also be kept properly stocked up, so that, should a first aid situation or medical emergency arise, you will have the necessary medicines and equipment on hand to deal with it correctly.

Purchases should only be made via a pharmacist or doctor.

Once bitten

Malaria is spread through the bite of a mosquito (the female anopheles variety) infected with a parasite called plasmodium. If you are bitten by an infected mosquito, the parasite enters the bloodstream and travels towards the liver, where it reproduces quickly and infects red blood cells, which are essential for carrying oxygen. Infected blood cells burst open and this increases the rate of further infection. Infected red blood cells also clog together, creating circulation blockages inside the capillaries (which carry blood to the brain and other vital organs). The malaria cycle continues as the disease moves through the infected person's body and other mosquitos bite the victim and consume the parasite.

As a seafarer, it is important to understand how you may be at risk from malaria. The disease is prevalent in tropical and sub-tropical regions so if you are visiting ports or going on leave in affected areas (or perhaps you live in such an area), you should follow this advice:

- Prevent bites from mosquitos by using insect repellent. Cover your arms and legs and use a mosquito net when sleeping.
- Take malaria prevention tablets – making sure you take the correct tablets and complete the course.
- Seek help immediately if you develop malaria symptoms, even if you have not been in a malarial area for some months.

Further advice, including an interactive malaria map can be found on the World Health Organization's website: www.who.int/malaria



Malaria symptoms

Symptoms usually develop 7-15 days after being bitten but in some cases, malaria can lie dormant for up to a year before leading to illness.

Signs of malaria are often similar to flu, including vomiting, fever, chills, headache and sweating but these symptoms can be mild.

Further symptoms include muscle pains, diarrhoea and a general feeling of being unwell. Sometimes, a fever can happen in

cycles lasting four to eight hours, where the malaria victim can feel cold, with shivering for an hour, before developing a fever and severe sweating which can last two to six hours.

Plasmodium falciparum malaria is the most serious type of malaria and can lead to life-threatening complications, including seizures, organ failure, breathing problems and, rarely, severe anaemia. A blockage of blood vessels which supply the brain is the most serious complication.

Dengue fever

Dengue Fever is an infectious disease transmitted by the bite of Aedes mosquitoes in tropical and sub-tropical regions.

Common symptoms include:

- + A fever that comes on quickly and lasts two to seven days
- + Headache – but this usually isn't severe
- + Muscle and joint pain
- + A red rash that starts on your chest, back or stomach and spreads to your limbs and face
- + Pain behind your eyes
- + Feeling sick and vomiting
- + Diarrhoea

There is currently no vaccine or treatment for dengue fever – your body will usually fight off the disease a few days after the rash appears.

Prevention involves keeping your body covered as much as possible and/or using insect repellent when in dengue fever areas. Also, avoid areas where mosquitoes breed which is normally in standing water in domestic containers and try to remove such sources or cover them up.



Act FAST on strokes

A stroke is a condition in which brain cells suddenly die due to lack of oxygen. This can be caused by an obstruction in blood flow, or the rupture of an artery that feeds the brain. The patient may suddenly be unable to speak, there may be memory problems or one side of the body can become paralysed.

Although most people who have a stroke are older, young people can also suffer from them.

The results of a stroke depend on where the stroke occurs and how much of the brain is affected. Smaller strokes may result in minor problems such as weakness in a limb. Larger strokes may lead to paralysis or even death. Many stroke patients are left with weakness on

one side of the body, difficulty speaking and bladder problems.

Although a stroke can happen to anyone, certain risk factors can increase the chances of having one. These include:

High blood pressure – have your blood pressure checked annually.

Atrial fibrillation (Afib) - an abnormal heartbeat which can cause blood to pool in the heart and may form a clot and cause a stroke.

Smoking – it doubles the risk of stroke, so try and quit.

Alcohol – doctors recommend avoiding it, or cutting down to no more than two drinks each day.

High cholesterol – this can clog arteries and

cause a stroke. You need to see a doctor if your cholesterol level is more than 200.

Diabetes – many people with diabetes have health problems which are stroke risk factors. Make sure you manage your diabetes well if suffering from the condition.

Excess weight – this strains the circulatory system, so make sure you try to do some form of exercise five times a week.

Poor diet – make sure your diet is low in calories, cholesterol and saturated and trans fats. Try to eat five servings of fruit and vegetables each day.

Circulation problems – get them treated as fatty deposits can block arteries carrying blood to the brain, leading to a stroke.

How to recognise a stroke using the FAST test



Face – the face may have dropped on one side, the person may not be able to smile or their mouth or eye may have drooped

Arms – the person may not be able to lift one or both arms and keep them there because of arm weakness or numbness

Speech – their speech may be slurred or garbled, or the person may not be able to talk at all despite appearing to be awake

Time – it is time to dial for emergency help immediately if you see any of these signs or symptoms.

Heart of the matter

Heart attacks are another common reason why seafarers might need emergency medical treatment. Volume 2, Issue 1 of Health Watch covered some ways of keeping healthy to avoid heart problems, but it can also be valuable to learn some basic points about symptoms and treatment, should a fellow seafarer suffer a heart attack:

Symptoms include:

- + Central chest pain; a dull pain, ache or heavy feeling in your chest; or a mild discomfort that makes you feel generally unwell. It might feel like bad indigestion.
- + The pain or discomfort may radiate to the arms, jaw, back or stomach.
- + You may feel light-headed or dizzy and have shortness of breath.
- + You might feel nauseous or vomit.

What to do if you think someone is having a heart attack:

- + Straight away you need to call for emergency help so the crew member can be evacuated from the ship.
- + If the patient is not allergic to aspirin, give them a tablet (ideally 300mg) to slowly chew and swallow while waiting for paramedics to arrive. This helps to thin the blood and restore blood supply to the heart.
- + If the person is conscious, keep them calm and help them into a comfortable position. Loosen clothing around the chest area and remain calm until help arrives.
- + If the person becomes unconscious, make sure they are lying on their back. Clear the airway and loosen clothing at the neck, chest and waist. Check for breathing and pulse. If it is absent, and you are trained to do so, begin cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

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