

health

Keys diseases not all that exotic, experts say

But islands should inspire some caution

By DICK CONKLIN
Keys Sunday contributor

So I went to see my doctor. I said, "Hey doc, I think there's something wrong with me. You gotta check me out."

After the exam, the doc said, "Yeah, you got a Keys Disease."

I said, "No way! I think I want a second opinion."

He said, "OK, you're ugly too."

With apologies to the late Rodney Dangerfield, "Keys diseases" are no laughing matter. But are there some unique island infections that aren't found on the mainland? Some scary tropical bacteria, blown in by hurricanes, that have mutated over the centuries?

Probably not, say local doctors, but our Keys lifestyles — distinguished by lots of sun, water, fishing, diving and imbibing — make us more prone to certain ailments.

Staph is no laugh

Like the time I slipped on my dock and got a cut on my leg that just wouldn't heal. I went to my doctor (the real one) and he identified it immediately. "You slipped on your dock, right? I see a lot of those, that's a staph infection. Fishhook punctures also cause them. An antibiotic should clear it right up."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, most staphylococcus aureus (staph) cases are skin infections that may appear as pustules or boils that are often red, swollen and painful. These infections commonly occur where there are cuts or abrasions and a source of bacteria.

Few cases of methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) cases are reported in



File photo

Our water-based lifestyle presents some hazards, but nothing too exotic for traditional family medicine.

Monroe County. It is predominantly found in hospitals and health care facilities, and is usually transmitted by direct skin-to-skin contact or from shared items or surfaces (such as dirty towels) that have come into contact with someone else's infection.

Although the dangers of "stepping on a pop-top" (as cited by Jimmy Buffet in his hit song, "Margaritaville") have subsided with the advent of newer can designs, you still should replace those "blown-out flip-flops." To prevent fungal or parasitic infections and injuries, local docs suggest that you wear something on your feet at all times.

Dr. Andrew Wolszczak is a urologist and vice chief of staff at Marathon's Fishermen's Hospital. Both Wolszczak and Fishermen's CEO Kim Bassett cite the Keys' tropical climate and their patients' water-based occupations as reasons for sometimes giving preventative antibiotics beyond the usual 24-hour post-surgical period.

Coral cuts, scrapes

Lynn Mauck is a registered nurse at Fishermen's. He says, "Our marine atmosphere is full of micro life, and with warmth and humidity it finds a happy home. We live on islands with a large amount of coral rock

and dust. Remember, these are the skeletons of past living creatures."

Coral scrapes and cuts are common injuries that can occur in warm water to snorkelers and divers. Coral polyps, the soft living material that covers the surface of coral, can be easily torn away when touched or bumped. A skin infection may develop when small pieces of coral, other debris and bacteria get inside the wound. Scrapes and cuts from sharp-edged coral may take weeks or even months to heal.

"The sand here is spurred and tends to hang up in wounds," Mauck says. "I learned from local doctors how important good wound cleaning is. We have always had more incidents of staph skin infections."

To worry or not?

Middle Keys physician Dr. Ron Samess has also seen a higher percentage of patients with skin infections.

"We do have many old docks and buildings here," he says. "But the good news is that almost all of the infections I have treated, and there have been many, are successful with oral antibiotics. If a patient is compromised with other medical conditions like diabetes,

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Contaminated water can cause some serious discomfort

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cancer or AIDS, these infections can be harder to treat and may need IV antibiotics.

"Other local problems include sunburns, dehydration, diving with assorted bites, coral abrasions, and fishhooks in the wrong places.

"There has been too much media hype about MRSA," Samess says. "Yes, it can be a serious problem, but almost every case we see is easily treated with either oral or IV antibiotics. I haven't lost a patient or a patient's body part to MRSA yet," he says.

The revenge of Montezuma

Keys beaches are closed from time to time because of fecal contamination, which can cause severe intestinal distress, worse than the common Montezuma's Revenge variety.

The Giardia parasite is a common infection that lives in the intestine of infected

humans or animals. It can be transmitted by swallowing contaminated recreational water or by eating uncooked food.

Since most doctors are cautious about over-prescribing antibiotics, they will often first suggest the use of over-the-counter medications like anti-diarrheal caplets, Pepto Bismo, or the BRAT (bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast) diet to allow the body to deal with an intestinal infection.

Sun, skeeters, skin

Robert Eadie is the administrator of the Monroe County Health Department. He is familiar with all of these "Keys diseases," and cautions both locals and visitors to also remember the sun-related dangers of sunburn and skin cancer. He recommends using sun-block and lightweight cover-ups, especially under the mid-day sun.

He says that allergic reactions from jellyfish or man-of-war are not as common in the Keys as in other parts of

Florida, but sometimes infect swimmers and divers when carried here on a southerly wind. He says that the painful wounds can be treated with hot water or Adolph's meat tenderizer, which neutralizes the organism's toxins.

Eadie also says that the Keys have been relatively safe from mosquito-borne diseases,

thanks to our "active and effective mosquito control program."

Real Keys disease

Eadie says that compromised immune systems are also a factor in how we react to various infections. "I don't have specific statistics on the effects of alcohol and drug

abuse, but they can be a factor in many conditions such as heart and liver disease and stroke. Smoking and drinking together are like playing Russian roulette," he says.

Keys gastroenterologist Dr. Neal Rakov agrees that many of the ailments he treats are directly or indirectly caused by alcohol abuse. "That's the real Keys disease," he says.

Tackling decay with lasers

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removed to make room for the veneers, the procedure is not reversible.

Bonded resin fillings

Those unsightly metal fillings that mar the appearance of many a molar are now a thing of the past, thanks to bonded resins that are the same color as a healthy tooth.

Applied to the tooth in a series of thin layers, the resins are built up to form a filling that is practically undetectable. Goldner said bonded — also known as composite — fillings are beneficial not only because they look prettier, but also because they make the tooth stronger.

"Over time, the old silver fillings acted as a wedge that often made cracks off the sides of the tooth when you bit down," Goldner said. "But these bonded resin fillings

actually strengthen the tooth."

And the best news? Many dental insurance plans cover the use of resin fillings.

Micro-dentistry

Micro-dentistry is a method of treating tooth decay so that a greater portion of healthy tooth is preserved. Goldner said that by using a laser, dentists can conservatively prepare a tooth for filling, and in some cases can avoid having to numb their patients.

"[The dental laser] can take the place of probing into molars with little sharp instruments looking for the stickiness which signals decay," Goldner said. "The laser gives you a numerical reading on whether there is decay and how deep it goes."

The laser allows for early detection, which means more of the healthy part of the tooth can be saved — and that's really something to smile about.

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