



# The risks of playing Golf



## Medical Article

The following article appeared in the Lancet Medical Journal 24th April 1993. It may be of interest to those planning to play Golf during their time overseas in a tropical or subtropical country.

Sir,  
Dr Nathwani (Lancet, Feb 27, p565) has reported the association between Malaria and Oil industry workers in the tropics. Is it possible that a recreational activity like golf might also predispose to malaria infection in travellers to the tropics?

Over the past 12 months in Ireland I have seen 25 patients with malaria contracted during their time overseas. In three of these patients, in particular, their exposure had been limited as they were based in major cities; Accra (Ghana), Lagos (Nigeria) and Lusaka (Zambia).

During their time abroad they each expressed the opinion that they had only occasionally been bitten by mosquitoes. When questioned each of the individuals related that they had played golf on the courses close to their respective cities.

In each case the diagnosis of malaria was confirmed by laboratory screen and in the patient from Nigeria this had reached the dangerous level of a 5% parasitaemia. All patients were treated with either Quinine or Mefloquine and all showed a good response.

Most of the major capital cities of the tropics would be regarded as malaria free or of limited risk. Frequently travellers will abstain from their malaria prophylaxis if they feel that the risk is low. Good golf courses contain adequate water hazards and a significant expanse of unmown rough terrain. Swamps are also very often incorporated within the course. The triad of water, rough terrain and high temperatures provide an ideal location for the breeding of the anopheline mosquito, the carrier of malaria.

Add to this the fact that golfers in the tropics tend to play during the cooler hours around dawn or in the pleasant dusk hours of early evening, when mosquitoes abound, and you have the ideal circumstances for transmission of malaria.

Those planning to play golf in the tropics should be warned of the potential extra hazards which exist on the tropical golf course. They should be encouraged to continue their prophylaxis and also take adequate protection against mosquito bites in the form of insect repellants and appropriate clothing. Those developing any of the classical symptoms of malaria should attend for urgent medical care.

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## Health risks associated with Golf

Golf is an outdoor activity which may place those taking part in some particular health risks which may not be normal for others living or travelling through a region. Remember, some of these risks can also occur in temperate climates while other are more specifically related to the tropics.

## Leptospirosis (Weils Disease)

This bacterial disease is also known as rat-bite fever. It is typically found in those who are exposed to water which has been contaminated by infected rats urine. During a game of golf this is typically while retrieving a ball from a water hazard. It is a worldwide disease and has been responsible for deaths in Ireland over the past few years. At times it may be wise to forfeit a few points rather than delve deep into the water.

## Malaria

As mentioned in the previous letter, malaria risk on golf courses is associated with the fact that most games in the hotter climates take part early in the morning or late just before sunset - ideal mosquito activity times. Golfers should take particular care to use plenty of adequate insect repellent, avoid perfumes or aftershave lotions and to wear light coloured clothing.

## Bites & Stings

It has been mentioned above that retrieving a wayward golf ball can be hazardous. This is true not only of the water hazard but also when the ball strays into the rough. This region of the tropical golf course may be home to **SNAKES, SCORPIONS** and **TICKS**. Each of these animals can cause significant illness and they are best avoided at all times.

## Tick Borne risks

The larger animals are fairly obvious risks but the minute tick can spread a number of serious diseases including Lyme Disease, Typhus, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever and Crimean-Congo Haemorrhagic Fever to name a few. CCHF is a very severe viral disease which can even lead to death within a 24 hour period. Avoiding exposure (animals, ferns, long grass etc) is essential but also use adequate insect repellent on your ankles and exposed arms and tuck your pants into your socks to seal around your ankles before starting to play. Each night you should look for any embedded ticks and remove them properly.

## Sun Exposure & Dehydration

A round of golf may take 3 to 4 hours and in a tropical climate this can lead to significant sunburn and dehydration in the unprepared. Wear sensible clothing (cover arms and legs, loose fitting, wide brimmed hat), use sun block and carry a sufficient supply of fluid with you at all times. Don't necessarily trust any water fountains which may be about the course.

## Physical exertion during golf

Some courses are particularly hilly and completing a round may require a fair deal of physical exertion. If you are in the older age group or have any history of heart disease, make sure you are fit enough before you start. Talk to other tourists and have some commonsense. If you do become significantly breathless or develop any chest pain don't assume it is due to your inadequate swing! Stop, ask for assistance and get good medical care as soon as possible.

## Insurance check

Check your insurance cover before your trip to make sure 'activity sports' are included.

## Summary:

Good shoes. Good Repellent. Good Commonsense. Good shots!

National Travel Vaccine Appointment Tel 1-850-48 76 74

Web Address: [www.tmb.ie](http://www.tmb.ie)

This leaflet has been prepared using information supplied from W.H.O. Center for Disease Control (US) and other International sources.

Golf/TMB/Updated 25Aug2003

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- ✓ Tropical Diagnostic Laboratory
- ✓ Tropical Disease Screening Centre
- ✓ W.H.O. registered Yellow Fever Vaccination Centre
- ✓ International Vaccination and Malaria Advice Centres

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