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February 7 – 13, 2012

Health & Travel security Insights from around the five continents

North & Central America

February 7

United States – Bacterial infection possibly linked to raw milk: The number of confirmed cases of a bacterial infection potentially linked to raw milk from a Franklin County farm is now at 38. The state Health Department says 31 Pennsylvania residents, four people in Maryland, two West Virginia residents, and one person from New Jersey have become ill from *Campylobacter* bacteria. Symptoms include diarrhea, abdominal cramping, vomiting, and fever. All of them consumed raw milk from The Family Cow farm store in Chambersburg.

February 8

United States – Whooping cough outbreak: With two cases of pertussis confirmed in students at Joyce Kilmer and Stockton elementary schools on Friday and two more cases that may also turn out to be the highly contagious disease, the Cherry Hill School District (NJ) is advising parents and staffers to take preventive action. The illness, commonly known as whooping cough, is spread through the air by a cough or sneeze and begins with cold symptoms or a cough that worsen over one or two weeks. The disease is treated with antibiotics and is usually no longer fatal, but can lead to death primarily in unvaccinated or partially vaccinated children and infants

February 9

Jamaica – Smog advisory: Officials warned residents of the capital city of Kingston and the nearby parishes of St. Andrew and St. Catherine that smoke from a fire at the nearby Riverton City solid waste dump could potentially contain dangerous pollutants. Firefighters have been battling the blaze since February 6 and are not expected to bring it under control for another three days. Emergency management officials stated that it will likely take up to five additional days before the smoke dissipates over the city. Operations at Kingston's Norman Manley International Airport (MKJP/KIN) are currently normal with no smoke-related flight delays; however, air traffic controllers and pilots have reported difficulties due to hazy conditions in the area. There are concerns that smog levels could increase in the upcoming 24 hours, potentially affecting aviation in the area.

Mexico – US issues travel warning: U.S. travelers to Mexico are reminded that the Mexican federal government remains at war with drug cartels that are based in that country, which Washington has blamed for more than 12,000 deaths last year. The U.S. State Department issued a travel warning regarding the risks of traveling to Mexico. The warning noted that while drug cartels aren't targeting U.S. visitors specifically, the Mexican government is fighting armed narcotics traffickers in the country. The Mexican government reports that more than 47,000 people were killed during drug wars from 2006 through September 2011. The State Department said 120 U.S. citizens were killed in Mexico last year, up from 35 reported in 2007. The State Department said local police were tied to violence in Mexico, advising U.S. citizens in the country to maintain a low profile. The warning noted that most tourism resorts were somewhat shielded from the drug-related violence, however.

February 10

Haiti – Protests over peacekeepers: Residents in Gonaives, located in northern Haiti, staged a demonstration for the third consecutive day to protest the presence of United Nations peacekeepers.

February 10 – Haiti – continued:

Reports that emerged the previous week accusing Pakistani peacekeepers of sexually assaulting at least one youth in the city have sparked the unrest. The protesters have been burning tires to block roads and have thrown rocks at the peacekeepers, who have responded by firing their weapons to disperse the crowds. The peacekeepers' actions have further inflamed the protesters, who claim that only Haitian police officers are responsible for security during street demonstrations. Unrest in response to similar incidents involving U.N. personnel has taken place in the past.

United States – Mad cow disease: A Marin County (California) resident has died from – and another infected with – a brain disease related to what is sometimes incorrectly referred to as 'mad cow disease.' The woman who died had contracted Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and was identified by the Marin Independent Journal as 59-year-old Aline Shaw of San Rafael.

February 13

Mexico – Swine flu makes a comeback: It was just about three years ago that a strange new strain of the flu first appeared in Mexico, then spread across the border to the United States and eventually much of the globe. The H1N1 "swine" flu strain didn't behave like a "normal" flu, because it proved particularly dangerous to children and younger adults - the very groups of people who usually have the strongest defences against seasonal flu. After a quiet couple of years, more cases of the pandemic H1N1 flu are circulating again where it all began, Mexico.

United States – Genetically modified mosquitoes may be released soon in Florida: In an effort to help eradicate dengue fever and the mosquitoes that spread it, the Florida Keys Mosquito Control District (FKMCD) is seeking federal and state approval to release hundreds of thousands of genetically-modified (GM) mosquitoes, which have been designed to kill off the natural *Aedes aegypti* variety of the fly throughout Key West, Florida. The agency, which already routinely performs aerial sprayings of the area with anti-mosquito chemicals, believes it will save money in the long run by releasing the GM mosquitoes. Created by U.K.-based insect eradication company Oxitec, the GM mosquitoes have been created with an added gene that, unless they are given the antibiotic tetracycline, will automatically kill them. When they mate with wild mosquitoes the GM versions also pass on this gene to the offspring, which is intended to gradually decrease the population of wild mosquitoes over time. If approved, the release of GM mosquitoes in Key West will represent the first ever release of a GM creature in the U.S., and on a trial basis where scientists really have no idea what will happen. Like all other GMOs, it is unknown whether or not the GM mosquitoes will have a detrimental effect on the environment or humans, or how killing of large amounts of mosquitoes will disrupt the life cycles of natural ecosystems.

United States – Supply of a leukemia drug running short: A crucial medicine to treat childhood leukemia is in such short supply that U.S. hospitals may exhaust their stores within two weeks, leaving perhaps thousands of children at risk of dying from a largely curable disease, federal officials and cancer doctors say. Methotrexate is the drug, and the cancer it treats is known as acute lymphoblastic leukemia, which most often strikes children from 2 to 5 years of age. The cancer commonly spreads to the lining of the spine and brain, and oncologists prevent this by injecting preservative-free methotrexate directly into the spinal fluid. Ben Venue Laboratories was one of the nation's largest suppliers of the drug, but the company suspended operations at its plant in Bedford, Ohio, in November because of manufacturing and quality concerns, the company said. Since then, supplies have dwindled to the point where oncologists say they fear that shortfalls may occur soon. The four other methotrexate manufacturers in the U.S. are trying to increase production, said Valerie Jensen, associate director of the Food and Drug Administration's drug shortages program. The FDA is also seeking a foreign supplier to provide emergency imports until the approved domestic suppliers can meet demand, she said.

South America

February 7

Bolivia – Dengue fever outbreak: There are 40,000 suspected cases of dengue across Bolivia, although only 450 have been confirmed. The disease virtually explodes with the arrival of the rain season in the landlocked country. With six people already reported dead, health workers are scrambling to disinfect public areas to halt the chance of more people becoming sick. Bolivian authorities are also trying to educate locals on how to keep mosquito populations down.

Chile – Hantavirus alert: Chile declared a public health alert Monday over a hantavirus outbreak that has killed three people and infected at least 10 others. Health Minister Jaime Manalich said wildfires in the southern Bio Bio and Araucania regions have driven rats from their normal habitat into places where people live. In an interview with Chile's *Radio Cooperativa* on Monday, he said that he fears this may be just the leading edge of a much wider problem. The outbreak began in the El Manzano prison, where two inmates died and 10 others were under observation. Authorities learned on Sunday that two prison workers now have symptoms, and a person camping outside Concepcion died of the virus. Hantavirus does not spread between humans. People catch it when they are exposed to rat droppings and urine. The early symptoms are similar to the flu, including chills, fever and muscle aches. But it can spread quickly, leading to lung and kidney failure. Once it reaches the lungs, the chance of survival can be less than 50 percent, according to the U.S. National Institutes of Health.

February 10

Brazil – Rio police to strike: Police officers, firefighters and prison guards launched a strike in Rio de Janeiro state to demand higher wages. It was not immediately clear how many of the state's 70,000 personnel are participating in the work stoppage, but the action increases security concerns during the annual Carnival celebration, which takes place February 17-21. The Brazilian government will likely deploy soldiers to the city to provide security. Police officers in Bahia state have been on strike over pay issues since February 1, and the state has seen a significant increase in violence and homicides. Authorities in Salvador, Bahia's state capital and the site of Brazil's second largest Carnival, stated that the event will continue as planned despite the deterioration in security.

Paraguay – Dengue fever outbreak: Paraguay's Vice president Federico Franco and his wife, lawmaker Emilia Alfaro, are in hospital in the capital Asuncion following the discovery of symptoms of dengue fever, which is very common in tropical areas during the rainy season. Dengue is endemic in Paraguay, Bolivia, north of Argentina and most of tropical Brazil, and is transmitted by the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito. It causes high fever, head aches, vomiting, skin eruptions, and depression and in its haemorrhagic strain can be deadly. So far this year Paraguay's Health ministry has reported 700 possible dengue cases. This compares with the 62 deaths and 41,953 contagions during the twelve months of 2011.

Europe

February 8

France – Aviation workers strike: Flight disruptions are continuing as aviation workers observe a four-day strike to protest legislation that would require workers to give 48-hours' notice before striking. The work stoppage forced Air France to cancel approximately 40 percent of its long-haul flights and 30 percent of short- and medium-haul flights, with many flights at Paris Roissy-Charles de Gaulle and Orly airports among those affected. Because of the extent of the disruptions, Air France is now advising its passengers to consider postponing their journey until February 10. Flight cancellations and delays are expected to persist; this is expected to be the final day of the work stoppage, though there have been union calls for the strike to be extended beyond this date.

February 8

Hungary – Demonstration advisory: Between 1,000 and 2,000 Budapest Public Transportation (BKV) workers staged a demonstration outside the main BKV offices on Akacfa street in downtown Budapest yesterday. Protesters surrounded the entire block outside the BKV offices. Workers were protesting planned pay cuts and warned that they will carry out a strike in March if BKV management does not find other means by which to address the financial crisis the company is currently facing.

February 9

Norway – Influenza A outbreak: Health experts warned that Norway is facing an outbreak of influenza A, which is caused by a new strain of virus known as H3N2. The Southern and Western coastal areas of Norway are most affected while reported cases of the infection remain low in other parts of the country. Since mid-December in 2011, the cases of laboratory confirmed influenza increased markedly, with the virus being detected throughout Norway.

February 10

Greece – Unions strike: Greek unions began a 48-hour strike to protest economic austerity measures. Approximately 17,000 people gathered in two locations in Athens for a march to Syntagma Square. During one of the marches, violence broke out as some participants threw rocks and Molotov cocktails, prompting police officers to respond with tear gas. Flights were operating normally at the country's airports, but the strike shut down most public transportation. Train and ferry services were suspended; however, at least one service in Athens remained in operation for the transportation of protesters. Strike organizers have planned to hold further protests during the strike, as well as on February 12 and 13, when Parliament is slated to vote on the latest austerity plan.

Spain – Pilots strike: Spanish airline Iberia has cancelled 127 flights scheduled for February 13 in anticipation of a pilots' strike. The work stoppage is the first in a series of five days of strikes that are additionally scheduled for February 17, 20, 24 and 29. Pilots initially launched the strike campaign in December 2011 in protest over the carrier's plans to launch a new low-cost subsidiary airline.

February 13

Europe – Cold spell continues throughout Europe: In Europe, bitterly cold weather sweeping across the continent has claimed more victims. The death toll has now risen to more than 260. Bad weather has also seriously disrupted transportation in several countries. In other parts of the world the impact of the extreme weather is still far from over. From Italy to as far east as Japan, residents are struggling to survive the wave of severe winter weather. In Ukraine, one of the countries hit hardest by the cold snap, 135 people have died and over two-thousand people have been hospitalized. A majority of those deaths are homeless people who have been unable to find shelter from the cold. In Poland, more than 50 people have died from hypothermia, and temperatures have dropped below 30 degrees Fahrenheit. Like the Ukraine, the homeless population makes up a majority of the deaths, and government officials have set up shelters for those seeking refuge. Authorities expect the Danube River to freeze over by the end of this week. The Danube River, which spans more than 17-hundred miles and runs through nine different countries, is vital to Europe's transport, power, and irrigation industries.

Middle East & Asia / Pacific

February 8

Iraq – Cholera outbreak: Cholera is spreading quickly in Iraq and the number of cases and deaths is rising alarmingly. This contagious disease coincides with a host of other tragedies afflicting Iraqis. Health ministry officials say they are certain the disease will keep spreading in the coming two months unless the government takes drastic measures to contain it.

February 8

Maldives – Ousted president says army forced him out: Supporters of ousted President Mohamed Nasheed staged violent street protests in the capital city of Male, demanding his reinstatement. Addressing supporters, Nasheed claimed that military officials forced him to resign at gunpoint yesterday. Participants threw firebombs and vandalized a TV station that had opposed Nasheed, forcing police forces to fire tear gas at the demonstrators. The confrontation was concentrated at Republic Square, located near the police and military headquarters. Two pro-Nasheed lawmakers were arrested; there were no reports of injuries in the unrest. Opposition members reportedly reached out to India to intervene in the crisis; however, the Indian Foreign Ministry stated that it views the situation as an internal Maldivian affair. India helped to foil a previous coup attempt in 1988. The unrest has not affected the nation's tourism sector. Many Western governments have advised their citizens to exercise caution and avoid travel to Male, the capital, with the exception of Male International Airport (VRMM/MLE). Flight operations continue as normal, and there have been no disturbances reported at the airport, which is located on Hulhule Island. There have also been no reported demonstrations or violence outside Male Island. Travelers to other destinations in the Maldives should monitor developments but there are no recommendations to cancel trips to destinations outside the capital at this time.

February 9

China – Alert after chemical leak: Officials in Zhenjiang in Jiangsu province said phenol, an acid compound used to make nylon and detergents, was found in its water source last week. The newspaper said it may have been caused by a leak from a South Korean vessel. According to the Shanghai Daily, Jiangsu officials said the pollution did not pose a threat to peoples' health but Chen Wei, a director at Shanghai's environmental protection bureau, said the city was ready to shut its main reservoir at the mouth of the Yangtze if abnormal levels of chemicals were detected. Bottled drinking water in Zhenjiang and neighbouring cities had been sold out as residents reported a bad smell in their tap water, the paper said.

Israel – Strike advisory: A general strike by workers belonging to the Histadrut Labour Federation continues to affect rail services, banks and government ministries. The National Labour Court ruled that while the open-ended strike could continue, no actions were permitted at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion International Airport (LLBG/TLV). The court has ordered the two parties to continue negotiations, and may rule later on whether the strike will be allowed to continue.

Thailand – Bombing in south: An explosives-laden truck detonated outside a public health office in the Muang district of Pattani province in far southern Thailand. One person was killed and 15 others were injured in the blast. The truck bomb also destroyed at least 10 vehicles parked close to the office building. No group has yet claimed responsibility for the bombing. While medics at a local hospital reported that most of the victims were Muslims, investigators believe militant Islamist rebels active in the region were behind the attack. Security forces in the three Muslim majority provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat are on a constant state of alert due to an ongoing low-level insurgency that has seen numerous bombings over the past decade in rural regions of far southern Thailand. Such attacks do not affect the wider security situation outside these three provinces.

February 10

Indonesia – Volcanic eruption: A restless volcano in northern Indonesia erupted today, spewing clouds of ash as high as 2 kilometres into the sky, the country's National Disaster Management Agency said. The authorities are warning residents to stay away from the volcano, Mt. Lokon, in North Sulawesi, said Sutopo Purwo Nugroho, a spokesman for the disaster management agency. A 2.5 kilometre exclusion zone had already been set up around Mt. Lokon, which had been showing signs of activity in recent days. A series of eruptions by Mt. Lokon in July prompted the evacuation of thousands of local residents. The volcano also erupted in October and December.

Syria – Aleppo bombing: Two explosions occurred in Aleppo, Syria's main commercial center. Syrian state media is characterizing the explosions as terrorist attacks believed to have been perpetrated by suicide bombers. The attacks apparently targeted the Military Security Directorate and a building used by the police forces; authorities sealed off the New Aleppo district where the explosions occurred.

February 10 – Syria – continued:

Reports indicate that at least 25 people, including both civilians and military personnel, were killed in the blasts, while at least 175 others were injured. The bombings mark the first attacks to occur in Aleppo, which has not experienced the high level of violence that has occurred in many other cities since Syria's uprising began in March 2011. The apparent attacks in Aleppo and previous bombings in Damascus, the capital, in January 2012 and December 2011 are indicative of a progressive worsening of the security situation in the country's major urban centers. Meanwhile, the situation in many other locations of Syria remains volatile as of 10 February; this is especially the case in the central city of Homs, which has been the site of an ongoing crackdown against civilians by security forces. A major offensive is continuing in Homs, particularly in the Baba Amro, Inshaat and Khalidiya districts. Security forces launched heavy artillery strikes in the Sunni areas of Homs, meant to shatter the resistance of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the country's main rebel faction. Hundreds of soldiers, rebels and civilians have been killed in the flashpoint city over the past week and further violence is expected. Observers note that Sunni rank-and-file military members have mutinied and gone over to the rebel forces in certain areas, although the Syrian military, which remains mostly Alawite, continues to operate substantial ground forces.

February 13

Japan – Japanese Emperor to undergo bypass heart surgery: Japanese Emperor Akihito, 78, will undergo heart bypass surgery on Feb. 18 after a detailed examination found a heart problem had worsened, the Imperial Household Agency was quoted as saying. Kyodo news agency, quoting the Imperial Household Agency, said the emperor's blood vessels had narrowed over the past year. He had been treated in hospital in November for cold, fever and symptoms of bronchitis. The Imperial Household Agency was unavailable for comment.

Africa

February 8

Uganda – Plague outbreak: A Fresh outbreak of plague is suspected after two people died of similar symptoms in Vurra County, Arua District where the health officials have put the community on alert. Over the years, plague outbreaks have emerged from the neighbouring DR Congo.

February 9

Egypt – Military deploys troops: The military has deployed troops in Cairo and elsewhere as a precaution to maintain order ahead of a day of planned civil disobedience February 11. Numerous activist and revolutionary groups are calling for a general strike to include mass walkouts and civil disobedience to protest against the military-led government and to demand that it speed up the transfer of power to a new civilian government. The date also marks the one-year anniversary of former President Hosni Mubarak stepping down amid mass anti-government protests. Armoured vehicles and troops are in place at key facilities, including government buildings and Cairo International Airport (HECA/CAI). Checkpoints have been set up at the airport, where authorities are reportedly verifying identification documents and searching all vehicles entering the facility. Some groups, including the January 25 Revolution Youth Coalition and the April 6 Youth Movement, are planning marches to the headquarters of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in Cairo's Abbasseya district on February 10. Although many activist groups are calling for observance of the strike, not all organizations have given their approval, including the Coptic church and the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite this, disruptions are expected to occur in such areas as transportation, factory operations, universities and other schools. There also remains a potential for incidents of violence to occur; travelers and expatriates should maintain a low-profile over the next several days to minimize their exposure.

February 9

Nigeria – Lead poisoning: Lead contamination from hundreds of gold mines across north-western Nigeria has caused illnesses in children across the region. Across the state of Zamfara, where hundreds of artisanal mines are now in operation, young children processing ore are exposed to toxic levels of lead. Many others are exposed when family members return home from work covered in the toxic dust, when lead-filled ore is crushed in their homes, or when exposed to contaminated water and food. In some villages, mortality rates were as high as 40 percent among children who showed signs of lead poisoning. Healthcare workers also report high rates of infertility and miscarriage among adults in the region. While governmental and international organizations have treated more than 1,500 children showing signs of acute lead poisoning, the report says thousands more children require chelation therapy to remove lead from their bodies.

Nigeria – Security warning: The radical Islamist sect Boko Haram is threatening to attack U.S. interests in Nigeria. The threats come after the U.S. and Nigerian governments recently concluded joint talks on strategies to combat the group. In response, the sect is reportedly planning suicide attacks against U.S. targets, including the U.S. Embassy in Abuja, and has also allegedly threatened to assassinate the U.S. ambassador to Nigeria. The threats did not specifically include U.S. business interests in the country. Boko Haram primarily targets domestic Nigerian security and government facilities and personnel in an attempt to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria. Boko Haram has increasingly shown its ability to strike targets outside of its support structure in the Islamic communities in northern Nigeria. Attacks and threats have been reported in Nigeria's middle belt, which straddles the country and is the point where Christian communities from the south and Muslim communities from the north live in close proximity. Hundreds have been killed in sectarian and terrorist violence in the region the past year alone. Further attacks are expected in the long and short term.

Tanzania – Drought looming this year: There are growing fears that Simanjiro District in Manyara Region may suffer from yet another cycle of severe drought this year. Already there are reports that some farmers and livestock keepers have started to leave their villages and settle in others in the district or outside it. The Simanjiro MP, Mr Christopher Ole Sendeka, said at the weekend that the situation was bad and livestock keepers would suffer most. Last year, the vast district, inhabited mainly by nomadic pastoralists, went through yet another drought which led to crop failure and many cattle deaths. The legislator, who was speaking at the climax of the 35th anniversary of Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) held at Landanai Village, expressed his fears that the dry spell would lead to a shortage of water for domestic use and that of livestock.

A/H5N1 – Avian Flu – Latest update:

British government preparing for human flu pandemic: Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt spoke out as experts were continuing to cull 159,000 turkeys at a farm in Suffolk where the potentially deadly H5N1 strain, which can be transmitted to humans, was found. Ms Hewitt said: "We are preparing very, very seriously and thoroughly for the possibility of a pandemic flu." She added: "It is a very remote risk but if it did happen it could be very serious indeed." The risk to humans posed by Britain's first outbreak of the potentially deadly H5N1 strain of bird flu on a Bernard Matthews' farm at Holton, near Halesworth, is "negligible" officials have said. Experts are also playing down fears that the highly pathogenic bird flu strain - which has caused the deaths of 164 people in Asia and the Middle East since January 2003 - could ultimately mutate to a type easily passed between people. However, the Health Secretary told ITV1's The Sunday Edition that the Department of Health had conducted a massive preparatory exercise last week. Ms Hewitt said the NHS had its "normal stockpile" of masks for staff but the Government was considering whether it needed to order more. The Department of Health has also stockpiled enough Tamiflu antivirals to cover a quarter of the population, as advised by scientists. "We are taking the best possible advice on this," she insisted. Tests at the European Union laboratory in Weybridge, Surrey, confirmed the avian flu which killed more than 2,000 birds on the farm in Suffolk is the highly pathogenic Asian strain.

A/H5N1 – Avian Flu - Continued

British government & Avian flu – Continued: The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has dramatically increased the area where restrictions are in force in East Anglia to control the H5N1 outbreak. The Restriction Zone, in which poultry must be kept isolated from wild birds and movements must be licensed, covers 2,090 square kilometres (806 square miles) of east Suffolk and southeast Norfolk.

Outbreak in birds:

Nepal: While government authorities on Sunday confirmed the H5N1 strain of bird flu in Khanar and Itahari in Sunsari district, similar outbreaks were reported in Phakphok in Ilam district and Faktep in Panchthar, where more than 400 chickens have died. However, fowls in the affected areas are yet to be slaughtered, increasing the risk of the infection spreading to other localities.

Vietnam: Vietnam continues to be susceptible to outbreaks of bird flu and the A/H5N1 virus remains deadly to those who contract it, an official said. The deaths came after nearly 20 months of no reported cases of humans with the A/H5N1 virus. Nguyen Tran Hien, chief of the National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology, made the statement after Vietnam reported its first two bird flu fatalities this year. According to Hien, although the latest two victims were in the prime of life an 18-year-old man in the Mekong Delta province of Kien Giang and a 26-year-old woman in Soc Trang Province, also in the Mekong Delta--that does not mean that the virus has become stronger. He said that because the virus is specific to poultry, it is impossible to say whether a particular group of people may be immune to it. An individual's chance of contracting bird flu depends on the person's level of exposure to the virus and genetic predispositions, he added.

Human infection:

Indonesia: A 16 year-old Indonesian boy from Central Java province has died from avian influenza, putting the total fatalities to 104 out of 128 contracted people in the hardest-hit country, the Indonesian Health Ministry said on Saturday. The boy died on February 10 at a hospital in the province and the result of examination on his blood samples came out on Friday, showing that he was contracted by the H5N1 virus, said the ministry spokesperson Lily Sriwahyuni Sulistyowati.

Iraq: Confirmed a second death in bird flu outbreak.



From Around the World

Smoking slows memory, reasoning in middle-aged men: New evidence suggests that smoking isn't only bad for the body but can also take a toll on the mind. A study published in the Archives of General Psychiatry linked smoking to faster, more dramatic age-related mental decline in men. Researchers from University College in London studied more than 5,000 men and 2,000 women from Britain's long-running Whitehall II study, which has surveyed the health of thousands of British civil service employees. The researchers studied each participant's performance on tests of memory, verbal skills and reasoning over a period of 10 years, beginning when the participants were about 56 years old. They found that men who smoked showed a greater decline in these mental functions than those who had never smoked. Smoking seemed to speed up the cognitive aging process, making men function mentally as if they were 10 years older, said Severine Sabia, the study's lead author. "For example, a 50-year-old male smoker shows a similar cognitive decline as a 60-year-old male never-smoker," she said.

From Around the World

Smoking & Memory – Continued: The brain changes weren't necessarily permanent. Men who stopped smoking more than 10 years before the tests performed as well as those who had never smoked. But men who kicked the smoking habit less than 10 years before the cognitive tests began didn't do much better than the men who'd kept smoking. While smoking seemed to drain men's brains, the researchers didn't find a similar connection between smoking and declining mental function in women. Sabia said that could be because women in this age group smoked less than men do, or that there were simply fewer women in the study. Researchers said there are several factors that could explain the connection between smoking and mental decline. One reason could lie in the way smoking affects the heart, lungs and blood vessels. Because smoking ups the risk of vascular disease, it could limit the body's ability to deliver the blood, oxygen and nutrients the brain needs to function at its best. The study's authors said that smoking's long-term effects on mental function are probably underestimated, since smokers are more likely to die of other health problems before they have the chance to develop dementia.

New malaria data reveals more adult victims: Although malaria-related deaths have been declining, a new report in *The Lancet* puts a damper on this good news, suggesting that the decline is not nearly as significant as researchers once thought. According to the new study, there were 1.2 million deaths from the mosquito-borne disease in 2010 — a number almost twice as high as the estimate published in the *World Malaria Report 2011*. For this study, researchers at the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation combed through all available malaria mortality data from 1980 to 2010. They found that malaria deaths worldwide climbed from 1 million in 1980 to a peak of 1.8 million in 2004 — a number that's partially explained by the population increase in malaria-endemic countries during that time period. From this peak number, global malaria deaths have fallen to 1.2 million in 2010 — an impressive decrease, but not as drastic as had previously been calculated. Furthermore, the new malaria research demonstrates that, contrary to earlier thought, a significant number of malaria deaths actually occur in older children and adults. While African children under the age of five remain the hardest hit — accounting for 700,000 malaria deaths in 2010, or 56 percent of the world's total — over a third of all deaths from malaria occurred in adults. As the authors of the new study report, "That malaria is a previously unrecognized driver of adult mortality also means that the benefits and cost-effectiveness of malaria control, elimination, and eradication are likely to have been underestimated." ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross takes this increased estimate of malaria mortality as a call to bolster efforts made by all world health authorities to combat this disease. "We have the means to dramatically reduce the number of malaria cases and deaths," he says. "We need to encourage and promote the full spectrum of effective measures against malaria, including rapid diagnosis and treatment, insecticide-treated bednets, and indoor residual spraying of small amounts of insecticides such as DDT — which remains the most effective mosquito killer and repellent and is completely safe for humans." He adds that, unfortunately, the environmentalist crusade against DDT is one of the best examples of how a misguided campaign can actually sacrifice human lives. ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan adds that these new data will also help to illuminate a neglected aspect of malaria: "The toll of adult malaria episodes, numbering in the hundreds of millions, sucks the life out of many national economies that are struggling to rise from poverty."

Your Healthy Column – All you wanted to know about vitamin D

Why is vitamin D important?

The main action of vitamin D is to help calcium and phosphorus — essential for the structure and strength of our bones — in our diet to be absorbed from the gut. Scientists have found that vitamin D may help prevent diseases such as cancer, diabetes and heart ailments. Vitamin D is a fat-soluble vitamin. The fact that it dissolves in fat is important, because it means the body can store it for future use. Ultraviolet B (UVB) in sunlight rays convert cholesterol in the skin into vitamin D.

What are the symptoms of vitamin D deficiency?

Many people have no symptoms, or only vague ones such as tiredness or general aches. Because symptoms of vitamin D deficiency are often very non-specific, the problem is often missed. The diagnosis is more easily reached in severe deficiencies with some of the classical (typical) symptoms and bone deformities. Symptoms in adults:

- General vague aches and pains.
- In more severe deficiency, there may be more severe pain and also weakness. This may lead to difficulty in standing up or climbing stairs, or can lead to the person walking with a 'waddling' pattern. This is known as osteomalacia.
- Pain in the ribs, hips, pelvis, thighs and feet.

How much vitamin D do I need?

Our daily requirement is being increased depending on newer research. A few years ago, 400 iu was thought to be all we needed, but now for adults around 2000 units is considered good for health.

Which foods contain vitamin D?

Surprisingly few foods contain vitamin D. This is because the human body is built to get vitamin D through the skin (from sunlight). There are three vitamin D super foods: salmon, mackerel, mushrooms exposed to ultraviolet light. Other food sources of vitamin D include: cod liver oil, tuna canned in water, sardines canned in oil, milk or yogurt — regardless of whether it is whole, non-fat, or reduced fat — fortified with vitamin D, beef or calf liver, egg yolks, cheese.

Who gets vitamin D deficiency?

A significant percentage of us are becoming vitamin-deficient. This is mainly due to our indoor lifestyle, our dresses, the use of burqa in Muslim women, our skin colour. Particularly vulnerable are growing children, pregnant and breast-feeding women, those in hospital for a long time, or housebound people, people using a lot of sunscreen (sun-protection factor — 15 or above), elderly people (due to thinner skin than younger people) and those with some medical conditions like Crohn's disease, coeliac disease, liver and kidney disease.

How is deficiency diagnosed?

It may be suspected from your medical history, symptoms or lifestyle. A simple blood test for vitamin-D level can make the diagnosis. Blood tests for calcium and phosphate levels may also show changes linked to a low level of vitamin D.

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