

## **Experts warn to watch for signs of ulcer**

As the temperature continues to drop, infectious disease experts are warning people in Geelong and Bellarine communities to be aware of the signs and symptoms of Buruli ulcer (BU).

Cases of Buruli ulcer have increased significantly in Victoria in recent years, particularly along the Mornington and Bellarine peninsulas, and more recently along the Surf Coast and several suburbs of Greater Geelong, including Belmont, Highton, Wandana Heights, Newtown, Grovedale and Marshall.

Buruli ulcer (sometimes referred to as the Bairnsdale ulcer) is a skin disease caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium ulcerans*.

The toxins made by the bacteria destroy skin cells, small blood vessels and the fat under the skin, which causes ulceration and skin loss. These lesions are usually painless. It is important to know that not all Buruli ulcers appear as 'ulcers' – they can be nodules or red painful swellings of limbs (often called cellulitis).

The ulcer generally gets bigger with time, so early diagnosis and prompt treatment can minimise skin loss and make treatment easier.

Whilst transmission and infection usually occurs in the warmer months, due to the four to six month incubation period, now is the time GPs and health professionals begin to see cases presenting.

Associate Professor Daniel O'Brien, Deputy Director of the Barwon South West Public Health Unit, said early diagnosis is vital in minimising the severity of the ulcer.

"Whilst mosquito activity is reasonably low during the winter months, now is the time health professional begins to see patients present with ulcer symptoms," he said.

"Early diagnosis of wounds is so important as it means that treatment can be initiated early, enabling quicker, more effective treatment resulting in less damage. I encourage anyone in these affected suburbs that notice any non-healing wounds or lumps to see their GP."

Although the exact mechanism of infection in humans is still under investigation, research has shown that areas where humans are most frequently contracting Buruli ulcer are areas where soil, mosquitoes and possums are most frequently carrying the causative bacteria.

Infections are also more likely acquired in the warmer months, but can be acquired at any time of the year.

Therefore, the following precautions can reduce your risk:

- **When gardening, working or spending time outdoors:**
  - Wear gardening gloves, long sleeved shirts and trousers
  - Wear insect repellent on any exposed skin
  - Protect cuts and abrasions with a dressing
  - Promptly wash any new scratches or cuts you receive with soap and apply a topical antiseptic and dressing.
- **Reduce mosquito breeding sites around houses and other accommodation by reducing areas where water can pool (including pot plant containers, buckets, open tins or cans, discarded tyres, and other untreated, freshwater pools).**
- **Mosquito proof your home by securing insect screens on accommodation.**
- **Avoid mosquito bites by:**
  - Using personal insect repellents containing diethyltoluamide (DEET) or picaridin
  - Covering up by wearing long, loose-fitting, light-coloured clothing
  - Avoiding mosquito-prone areas and vector biting times, especially at dusk and dawn.
- **Exposed skin contaminated by soil or water should be washed following outdoor activities.**
- **See your doctor early if you have a slow-healing or suspicious skin lesion.**

Laboratory testing for Buruli ulcer can be conducted for free for patients (although a handling fee may still apply).

For more information on Buruli ulcer, go to

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/Buruli-ulcer>

*Ends*

### **Media Contact**

Sara Bonnici

Public Affairs & Communications

Ph (03) 4215 1119 [media@barwonhealth.org.au](mailto:media@barwonhealth.org.au)