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Crew Health & Welfare - Illness



PEOPLE

Crew Health & Welfare – Illness

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Introduction

This is one in a series dealing with crew health and welfare. This first briefing outlines the most frequent crew illness claims. The second in the series looks at crew fitness. The briefing reviews the duty of care that ship operators have towards their sea staff in matters of health and welfare.

The source of much of the medical advice is the UK National Health Service, 'NHS Choices'. Where other sources are used, they are quoted in the text.



Top Ten Illness Claims

The following table shows the ten illness categories that give rise to the highest numbers of crew illness claims. (Source: 'North' database).

Cardio-Vascular (heart or blood vessels)

- Heart attack
- Stroke
- Hypertension

Gastro-intestinal (digestive tract)

- Appendicitis
- Food poisoning
- Haemorrhoids
- Stomach / bowel cancer

Genito-Urinary (reproductive & urinary systems)

- Kidney disease
- Urinary infections
- Sexually transmitted disease
- Bladder / testicular / prostate cancer

Cancer (Also see other categories in this table)

- Skin, liver, bone, lymphatic

Back (excluding injuries sustained on board)

- Osteo or rheumatoid arthritis
- Slipped or prolapsed disc

Respiratory System (lungs)

- Influenza
- Bronchitis, pleurisy, pneumonia
- Lung cancer

Tropical / Infectious Disease

- Malaria
- Tuberculosis
- Hepatitis

Abscess (pus build-up within body tissue)

- Skin
- Teeth
- Internal

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Mental Disorder

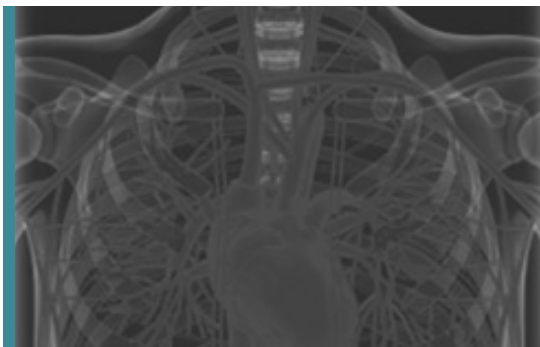
- Depression
- Stress related illness

Diabetes

- Type 2 diabetes mellitus

We shall now go on to look at the causes of the main illnesses and how they can be prevented.

Cardiovascular Disease



Hypertension, or high blood pressure, puts extra strain on the heart and blood vessels. Over time, the extra strain increases the risk of a heart attack or stroke. Heart attacks and strokes can be fatal. Hypertension generally has no symptoms. That is why it is sometimes called a 'silent killer'. The only way to detect hypertension is by measuring blood pressure. Hypertension may have a range of causes, but lifestyle can increase the risk of developing it. The risk of developing hypertension can be reduced by following the guidance given below. Also see national and international health websites, such as:

New Zealand (Southern Cross Healthcare Group), Coronary heart disease - causes, symptoms, prevention;

USA, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention;

World Heart Federation, Cardiovascular Disease Fact Sheets.

- ✗ Don't eat too much salt
- ✓ Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables
- ✓ Exercise regularly
- ✗ Don't become overweight
- ✗ Don't drink too much alcohol
- ✗ Don't smoke

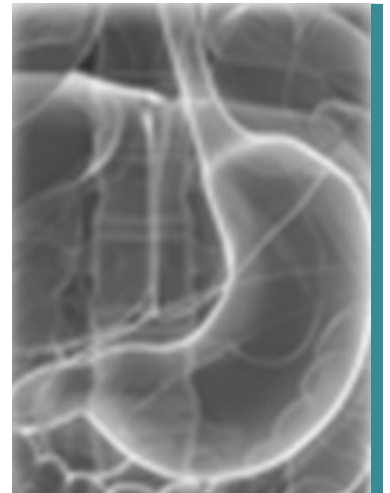
Other factors affecting blood pressure could be:

- Age – Effects of an unhealthy lifestyle can build up over time and increase blood pressure.
- Ethnic Origin – People of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian

origin appear to be at greater risk than others.

- Family History – People who have family members with high blood pressure are at greater risk.

Gastro-intestinal (GI) Disease



The digestive tract, also known as the gastro-intestinal (GI) tract, starts at the mouth, continues to the oesophagus, stomach, intestines and ends at the anus. The entire system is about nine metres long.

Appendicitis is a frequent cause of illness claims. It is a medical emergency that requires prompt surgery. Left untreated, appendicitis can be fatal. Appendicitis is most common in the 10 – 30 years age group. The causes of appendicitis are not fully understood. Therefore there is no guaranteed prevention.

Other GI illnesses, including stomach and bowel cancers, can be prevented. Please see below some advice on how to avoid developing GI diseases.

- ✓ Eat more fibre
- ✓ Drink plenty of water
- ✓ Maintain high standards of personal hygiene
- ✓ Exercise Regularly
- ✓ Ensure highest standards of food hygiene
- ✓ Eat small, well balanced, regular meals
- ✗ Don't drink too much alcohol
- ✗ Don't smoke
- ✗ Avoid processed, fatty or acidic foods

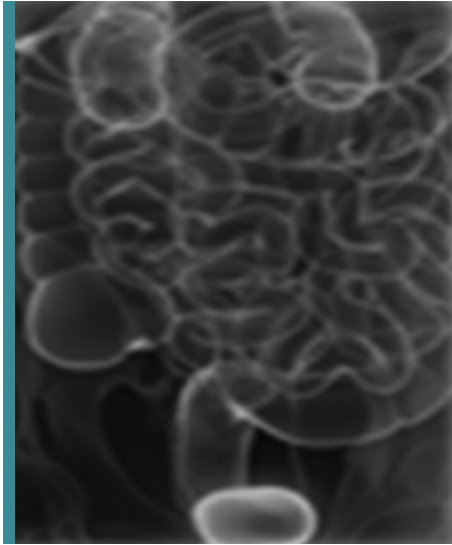
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Genito-urinary Disease



Hypertension, along with diabetes, is the most common cause of kidney disease. Hypertension and diabetes are dealt with elsewhere in this loss prevention bulletin.

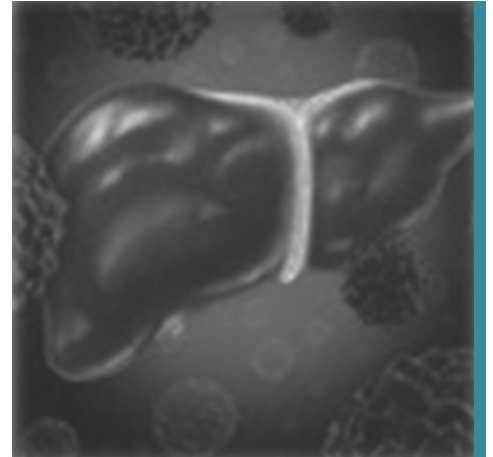
The causes of genito-urinary cancers cannot always be determined. Researchers believe that smoking may be a contributory factor in some cases, see: American Cancer Society **What are the risk factors for bladder cancer?** Exposure to certain other types of harmful chemicals may also be a cause. Prostate cancer is more common in men aged over 50. Those of Afro-Caribbean descent are more at risk than others, see: Cancer Research UK **prostate cancer risks and causes**. Almost half of all cases of testicular cancer affect men between the ages of 20 and 34. White men have a higher risk of testicular cancer than those of other ethnicities. There is also some indication that some prostate and testicular cancers may be due to defective genes inherited from parents.

Urinary tract infections (UTI) are more common in women than in men. Good personal hygiene and drinking plenty of water are recommended ways of keeping UTIs at bay. Men with an enlarged prostate gland are more prone to urinary tract infection.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) can, most certainly, be prevented. The table below gives some guidance on how to avoid STDs. Also see US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of STD Prevention, **Information**

- ✓ **Abstinence: the most reliable way to avoid infection is to not have sex**
- ✓ **Use male latex condoms**
- ✓ **Reduced number of sexual partners**
- ✓ **Avoid sex if you have an STD**
- ✓ **Vaccination against hepatitis B and human papilloma virus (HPV)**

Cancer



Cancers affecting gastro-intestinal, genito-urinary and respiratory systems are dealt with under the relevant section headings. Lymphatic cancers and primary cancer affecting bones have causes which are not fully determined, but it is not believed that lifestyle is a contributory factor. Also see UK Lymphoma Association **causes of lymphoma** and Cancer Research UK **risks and causes of bone cancer**.

There are measures that can be taken to help prevent skin cancer. Black or brown skinned people have a very low risk of developing skin cancer. Fair-skinned people are at risk. Those who work out-doors are at increased risk, because they are often exposed to the sun for long periods. The preventative measures are simple:

Stay out of the sun and make sure exposed skin is always covered when in direct sunlight. Also see Cancer Research UK **skin cancer risks and causes**

There are also measures that can be taken to protect against the risk of contracting liver cancer and those are listed below. Also see American Cancer Society **What are the risk factors for liver cancer?**

- ✗ **Don't drink too much alcohol**
- ✗ **Don't become overweight**
- ✓ **Vaccinations against Hepatitis A & B**
- ✗ **Avoid risk factors associated with diabetes (see page 5)**
- ✗ **Avoid taking anabolic steroids, as used by body-builders**

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Back Problems



Back pain is one of the most frequent causes of lost work time in many industries, not only shipping. There are many risk factors for back pain. Age is certainly a risk factor. People aged 30 to 60 are more likely to have disc related disorders than younger people. Those over 60 are more likely to suffer from pain related to osteoarthritis.

There is some evidence to suggest that certain types of back problems could have a genetic component, i.e. they could be passed down through families.

Nothing can be done to prevent aging, or to change the genetic make-up of a person. There are, however, several preventative measures which can be taken to avoid back problems and these are listed in the table below.

- ✗ **Avoid repetitive bending**
- ✗ **Avoid sitting or standing for long periods**
- ✗ **Don't become overweight**
- ✗ **Don't smoke**
- ✓ **Exercise regularly**

Respiratory System Disease



Most respiratory system problems resolve themselves within 10 days. Common cold, influenza (flu) and sinusitis are viral infections that are not treatable with antibiotics. Some problems can be caused by bacterial infections or other factors and can be more serious, or even fatal. Pneumonia, chronic bronchitis, pleurisy and lung cancer are examples of more serious conditions. Tuberculosis (TB) is also a disease of the respiratory system. TB is dealt with in the section on infectious and tropical diseases.

There are measures that can be taken to protect against respiratory problems and these are listed below.

- ✗ **Don't smoke**
- ✓ **Maintain high standards of personal hygiene**
- ✓ **Get a flu shot and pneumonia vaccine if available**

Tropical / Infectious Diseases

The main tropical and infectious diseases affecting seafarers, apart from common cold and flu, are hepatitis, malaria and TB. Protective measures against hepatitis and malaria are dealt with in the tables below.

Protection against TB is to have the BCG vaccination, ideally when a child and certainly before the age of 35. This vaccine is ineffective for those over 35. TB is a bacterial infection spread through inhaling tiny droplets from the coughs or sneezes of an infected person. Prevention is therefore best practiced by those having the disease adopting 'cough etiquette' and respiratory hygiene techniques:

- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing;
- Using the nearest waste receptacle to dispose of the tissue after use;
- Performing hand hygiene (e.g., hand washing with non-antimicrobial soap and water, alcohol-based hand rub, or antiseptic hand wash) after having contact with respiratory secretions and contaminated objects/materials.
- Also see the Global Health Education website, **TB Prevention - Vaccine, drug treatment, isolation.**

There are vaccines to protect against other tropical diseases such as cholera and yellow fever. Seafarers should ensure that their immunisations against such diseases are kept up to date.

Measures which need to be taken against epidemics, like the recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa, are the subjects of specific information and advice is provided on the North website. Advice and information is updated as necessary.

Prevent Hepatitis

- ✓ **Vaccination against hepatitis A & B**
- ✓ **Maintain high standards of personal hygiene**
- ✓ **Ensure highest standards of food hygiene**
- ✓ **Follow guidance given in table covering STDs**
- ✓ **Ensure tattoos & piercings done with sterile equipment**
- ✗ **Don't take drugs**
- ✗ **Avoid blood to blood contact**

Prevent Malaria

- ✓ **Take correct antimalarial tablets for area**
- ✓ **Use insect repellent**
- ✓ **Wear long-sleeved shirts and long trousers**
- ✓ **Ensure adequate protection in living & sleeping areas**

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Abscess

An abscess is a painful collection of pus, usually caused by a bacterial infection. Dental abscesses usually occur as a result of tooth decay. A skin abscess often appears as a swollen, pus filled lump under the skin surface. Internal abscesses are more difficult to identify, but signs include pain in the affected area, a high temperature and generally feeling unwell.

It's difficult to prevent internal abscesses, as they are often complications of other conditions, but the risk of having skin or dental abscesses can be reduced. See the table below.

- ✓ **Take good care of your teeth**
- ✓ **Maintain high standards of personal hygiene**
- ✗ **Don't share towels, baths, razors or toothbrushes**
- ✗ **Take care when shaving to avoid nicking skin**
- ✓ **Clean any wounds immediately**
- ✗ **Don't smoke**
- ✗ **Don't become overweight**
- ✓ **Eat a healthy diet, rich in vitamins & minerals**

Mental Disorders

Stress, depression and anxiety are the most common mental disorders that affect seafarers. Addiction can also be classed as a mental disorder. Addiction is most commonly associated with gambling, drugs, alcohol and tobacco. However, it's possible to be addicted to just about anything. Work, the internet, solvents, sex and even shopping all have their addicts. The table below gives some tips on how to prevent these mental problems.

- ✓ **Help others and look out for their problems too!**
- ✓ **Connect with people, a problem shared is a problem halved!**
- ✓ **Eat a healthy diet**
- ✓ **Exercise regularly**
- ✓ **Set goals & challenges, e.g. learn a new language**
- ✓ **Time management. Work smarter - not harder!**
- ✓ **Be positive & accept that sometimes things can't be changed**
- ✗ **Don't take drugs**
- ✗ **Don't drink too much alcohol**
- ✗ **Don't smoke**

Diabetes

Type 1 diabetes, where the body's immune system attacks and destroys the cells that produce insulin, usually develops before the age of 40, often during the teenage years. It is much less common than Type 2 diabetes. Sufferers need to take life-long insulin injections.

Type 2 diabetes is where the body doesn't produce enough insulin, or the body's cells don't react to insulin. The incidence of type 2 diabetes is rising, particularly in developing countries. Diabetes has become one of the major causes of premature illness and death in most countries, mainly through the increased risk of cardiovascular disease. Ethnicity is also a risk factor: people of south Asian, Chinese, African-Caribbean or black African origin are at greater risk than others. Also, type 2 diabetes has a genetic factor; the risk of developing the condition is increased if a close relative also has the disease. Also see: **Diabetes risk factors - Diabetes UK**

Additionally, Swire Pacific Offshore and The Missions to Seafarers have jointly produced, "**A Seafarer's Guide to Understanding Diabetes**".

The onset of type 2 diabetes can be resisted by employing the tips listed below.

- ✓ **Exercise regularly**
- ✓ **Eat a healthy diet**
- ✗ **Don't smoke**
- ✗ **Don't become overweight**

Dental Health

Although not a top 10 cause of medical claims, poor dental health amongst seafarers does lead to significant costs for their employers. There are simple measures that can be adopted to improve dental health, as listed in the table below.

- ✓ **Brush your teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste**
- ✓ **Have regular dental check-ups**
- ✗ **Don't smoke**
- ✗ **Don't drink too much alcohol**
- ✓ **Eat a healthy diet & cut down on sugar**

Eye Care

Eye problems are also common among seafarers. Below is a list of tips for avoiding those problems.

- ✓ **Wear eye protection at work**
- ✓ **Have your eyes tested regularly**
- ✓ **Eye screening is very important for diabetics**
- ✓ **Protect your eyes from sunlight**
- ✓ **Eat a healthy diet**
- ✗ **Don't drink too much alcohol**
- ✗ **Don't smoke**
- ✓ **Exercise regularly**

Diet, smoking, drinking and exercise all have an effect on eye health. Also see The UK Eye Research Charity website section on eye health: **Eye Health | Fight for Sight**

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Heat Illness

Also common amongst seafarers is heat illness. Adjustment to heat, under normal circumstances, usually takes about 5 to 7 days, during which time the body will undergo a series of changes that will make continued exposure to heat more endurable. Seafarers used to working in the heat, sweat more "efficiently". In other words they sweat sooner and sweat more, but lose less salt in the process. Whereas seafarers not used to working in the heat, lose more salt in their sweat. A little extra salt in food may help but salt tablets are not a good idea because the salt does not enter the body system as fast as water or other fluids. Seafarers exposed to very hot conditions in his working environment should drink 150 to 200 ml of fluids every 15 or 20 minutes.

The two main types of heat illness are heat exhaustion and heatstroke. Both can be potentially serious. The best ways to avoid becoming ill due to heat are listed in the table below.

- ✓ **Stay out of the sun, especially between 11:00 - 15:00 hrs**
- ✓ **Drink plenty of cold fluids**
- ✓ **Apply sunscreen and wear a hat**
- ✓ **Take a cool shower**
- ✓ **Turn off non-essential lights**
- ✓ **Sprinkle water on skin and clothing**

The Importance of Self-Medication

There has been an increase in the number of claims where seafarers have not followed a course of prescribed medication. This failure to follow 'doctor's orders' has led to serious illness and even death. A course of prescribed medication should be followed until completion. Often, a patient will stop taking prescribed medicine because they feel better and therefore do not feel that they need to continue the course. Such action should only be done on the advice of the treating doctor.

We recommend that all seafarers carry all of their prescribed medication with them for the entire duration of the intended voyage, ideally with an extra contingency supply. They should also advise the Master of any medication they are taking when they join the ship.

Conclusion

Most people are probably already aware that smoking is a major cause of heart and lung troubles. They may not be so aware that quitting smoking can also reduce the chances of developing mental, dental, back or skin problems. The tables in this briefing show that there a number of self-help measures that can be adopted that can help prevent the onset of a large number of illnesses. Those measures will be discussed further in No.2 of this series of 'Crew Health & Welfare' entitled 'Fitness'.

In the meantime, the table below lists the main self-help measures.

- ✓ **No smoking**
- ✓ **Little alcohol**
- ✓ **Healthy diet**
- ✓ **Regular exercise**
- ✓ **Healthy weight**
- ✓ **Good hygiene**
- ✓ **Enough rest**

Disclaimer

The purpose of this publication is to provide a source of information which is additional to that available to the maritime industry from regulatory, advisory, and consultative organisations. Whilst care is taken to ensure the accuracy of any information made available no warranty of accuracy is given and users of that information are to be responsible for satisfying themselves that the information is relevant and suitable for the purposes to which it is applied. In no circumstances whatsoever shall North be liable to any person whatsoever for any loss or damage whensoever or howsoever arising out of or in connection with the supply (including negligent supply) or use of information.

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Useful Links

The following table on Page 16 provides details of the organisations and websites listed in this Briefing. There are also some additional websites listed.

Organisation	Website	Details
UK NHS Choices	www.nhs.uk/pages/home.aspx	A wide range of advice on many health and welfare issues.
USA ODPHP	http://health.gov/	A lot of useful advice on diet and fitness.
Southern Cross Healthcare Group, New Zealand	www.southerncross.co.nz/AboutTheGroup/HealthResources/MedicalLibrary/tabid/178/vw/1/ItemID/191/Coronary-heart-disease-causes-symptoms-prevention.aspx	Coronary heart disease – causes, symptoms, prevention.
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USA	www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/	Heart disease risk factors & prevention.
World Heart Federation, Switzerland	www.world-heart-federation.org/heart-facts/fact-sheets/	Heart disease risk factors & prevent.
National Institute of Diabetes & Digestive & Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), USA	www.niddk.nih.gov/Pages/default.aspx	Wide range of information on diabetes & digestive, kidney, liver, urologic, endocrine, and metabolic and blood diseases. Also advice on weight control, diet, nutrition & healthy living.
American Cancer Society, USA	www.cancer.org/index	Wide range of information on issues surrounding the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of different types of cancer.
Cancer Research UK	www.cancerresearchuk.org/	Wide range of information on issues surrounding the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of different types of cancer.
Lymphoma Association, UK	www.lymphomas.org.uk/	Information on lymphatic cancer.
Quit Victoria, Australia	www.quit.org.au/	Advice on stopping smoking.
Global Health Education, UK	www.tbfacts.org/	Information about tuberculosis.
American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP)	http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en.html	Wide range of information on many health topics.
Diabetes UK, UK	www.diabetes.org.uk/	Information on diabetes.
Fight for Sight, The Eye Research Charity, UK	www.fightforsight.org.uk/about-the-eye/eye-health/	Advice on eye care.
Swire Pacific Offshore & The Missions To Seafarers	www.ifsma.org/resources/Good-Health-for-Seafarers-Guide-MtS.pdf	A Seafarer's Guide to Understanding Diabetes