

Malaria parasites 'resist drugs'

International scientists say they have found the first evidence of resistance to the world's most effective drug for treating malaria.

They say the trend in western Cambodia has to be urgently contained because full-blown resistance would be a global health catastrophe. Drugs are taking longer to clear blood of malaria parasites than before. This is an early warning sign of emerging resistance to a disease which kills a million people every year. Until now the most effective drug cleared all malaria parasites from the blood within two or three days but in recent trials this took up to four or five days.

The BBC's Jill McGivering, reporting from Cambodia, says it is unclear why the region has become a nursery for the resistance - but the local public health system is weak, and the use of anti-malaria drugs is not properly controlled. Drug defence The artemisinin family of drugs is the world's front-line defence against the most prevalent and deadly form of malaria. Two teams of scientists, working on separate clinical trials, have reported seeing the disturbing evidence that the drugs are becoming much less effective. There is particular concern because previous generations of malaria drugs have been undermined by resistance which started in this way, in this part of the world, our correspondent reports. The World Health Organization warned in 2006 there was a possibility the malaria parasite could develop a resistance to artemisinin drugs, and that there was particular concern about a decreased sensitivity to the drug being seen in South East Asia. It urged drug firms to stop selling artemisinin on its own in order to prevent resistance building up.