WAILUKU » A rare ailment that comes from eating poorly washed local produce has hit three Big Island residents in recent weeks, causing extreme pain and hospitalization.

The ailment, rat lungworm disease, is caused by a parasitic worm carried by slugs or snails.

Most people fully recover without treatment, health officials say. But rat lungworm disease can cause significant pain and trauma, including paralysis, blindness and death, as occurred in a fatal case in Taiwan in 1944, according to a joint state-federal study.

— Gary T. Kubota

FULL STORY >>

By Gary T. Kubota

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"It just got so intense, nothing took the pain away," said Big Island resident Zsolt Halda, 36. "It felt like they were doing surgery on me and ripping out my organs."

Halda was a victim of what is commonly called rat lungworm disease, a rare ailment that has inexplicably hit three Big Island residents hard in the last few weeks.

Dr. Jon Martell, the attending physician at Hilo Medical Center, said the three patients are the worst he has seen in his 14 years of treating such cases.

"Something's different," Martell said.

The disease arises from parasitic worms, Angiostrongylus cantonensis, sometimes ingested

WASH PRODUCE THOROUGHLY

Here is some information about rat lungworm disease, caused by the parasite Angiostrongylus cantonensis, provided in a fact sheet by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

Symptoms: Some people do not have any symptoms or have mild symptoms, while others have headache, stiff neck, tingling or painful feelings in the skin, low-grade fever, nausea and vomiting.
Contamination: The rat lungworm is usually spread through larvae in rat feces being consumed by snails or slugs, then eaten by human beings. It is not passed from one person to another person.

Treatment: People usually do not require treatment. The parasite dies over time even without treatment. Even people who develop meningitis usually do not need antibiotics. Sometimes the symptoms of the infection last for several weeks or months while the body's immune system responds to the dying parasites. The most common types of treatment are for the symptoms of the infection (such as pain medication for headache) rather than for the infection itself.

To avoid infection: Do not eat raw or undercooked snails or slugs, and thoroughly wash produce that might have them, especially home-grown produce such as lettuce. If you handle snails or slugs, wear gloves and wash your hands.

Other ways of getting infected can include eating raw or undercooked freshwater prawns, crabs or frogs. Fish do not spread this parasite.

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She said in certain instances, an analysis of spinal fluid can indicate the likelihood of rat lungworm disease.

Park said there is no medical treatment for the disease, and physicians treat the symptoms with pain relievers for aches and steroids for inflammation.

Beatrix Pfleiderer, another friend of Strauch's, said she fears the disease poses a "rising danger."

A 24-year-old Puna man was admitted to Hilo Medical Center with a case last week.

She said others have contracted the disease but have not gone to the hospital because they do not have medical insurance.

Park said the movement to consume home-grown produce is great and that people simply dunk produce in water and assume it is clean.

"You've got to clean each leaf," she said. "Our biggest challenge is constantly reminding people about the risks."

Park said a species of slug on the Big Island has tiny larvae, about 1 to 2 millimeters long.

The presence of the Southeast Asian slug, Parmarion martens, was noticed about 10 years ago and has spread rapidly, said Robert Hollingsworth, an entomologist with the U.S. Pacific Basin Agricultural Research Center.

"The concern is when it's very small and hard to see," he said.