

Health Hints for Travelers

Travel to other countries by Americans is growing. More than 8 million people in the U.S. travel worldwide each year. Those who return to their home country are also at risk for malaria and other diseases. This handout will help you stay healthy during your travels.

Vaccines

Some countries require tourists to get certain vaccines. Although vaccines are not required by law for most countries, they can help keep you healthy during your trip. Consult your health care provider for more facts about special travel vaccines. Check if your routine vaccines are current and get the flu vaccine when it is offered.

Traveler's Diarrhea

Traveler's diarrhea (TD) affects 10 – 60% of those who travel to other countries. This makes it the most common travel illness. The most common symptoms are abdominal cramps, diarrhea, nausea, bloating, urgency, fever, and malaise.

The illness most often begins quickly within the first week. It may also occur any time during or after travel. More than one attack of TD can occur in a single trip. If it is not treated, TD will often last 3 to 4 days. Sixty percent of those with TD get better within 2 days. Diarrhea lasting more than a few months is rare.

TD can be caused by eating food and water that has been infected with bacteria, viruses, and parasites. Fresh grown leafy greens, fruits and vegetables, uncooked meat or meat not stored in a proper manner are often tainted.

Prevent TD before it starts!

- Be careful when choosing your food and drink.
- Eat only cooked food and fruits that can be peeled.
- Avoid food from street vendors.
- Avoid unpasteurized dairy products.
- Use purified carbonated drinks when you can.
- Drink bottled water, soda, beer, or wine. Make sure the bottle is sealed.
- Avoid tap water and ice cubes.
- Drink liquids that can be heated (coffee, tea).
- Avoid brushing teeth with water that may be tainted.
- **If you can't boil it, cook it, or peel it, then forget it.**

Ways to Help Make Drinking Water Safe

Boil water. Bring water to a full boil for 1 minute. Cool to room temperature. This is the best way to make sure water is safe for drinking.

Purify water. If you can't boil the water, chemicals can be added to make the water safe to drink. Purifiers are better at killing viruses (like hepatitis) than filters.

- **2% Tincture of iodine,** 1 drop = 0.05 ml. (Do not use for a long time or if you are pregnant.) Let stand for 30 minutes; the water should then be safe for use. Very cloudy, muddy or cold water may take longer. Let it stand up to 2-3 hours before use. You can add 50mg of vitamin C to a liter of water and shake briefly to get

rid of the iodine taste and odor.

- For clear water add, 5 drops per quart or liter
- For cold or cloudy water, add 10 drops per quart or liter
- **Tetraglycine hydroperiodide tablets** (glodaline, potable agua, Coghlan's). The tablets can be found at drugstores and sporting goods stores. Follow the guidelines on the bottle.

Filter water. There are a number of filters on the market. They can help protect against protozoa like Giardia and bacteria like E. coli, but do not trap viruses well. You can learn more about them from stores that sell camping supplies or through catalogs that sell travel supplies (Sawyers, Magellans, etc.). Practice using the filter before your trip.

Treating Travelers Diarrhea

Replace fluids and electrolytes. This is the first and most crucial step. Fruit juices, caffeine-free soft drinks, broths, and bouillon are good sources. You can also eat rice, toast, or salted crackers

This is one formula for treating TD:

In glass #1, mix:

- 8 ounces of orange, apple, or fruit juice (rich in potassium)
- 2 Tsp of honey or corn syrup (contains glucose needed for absorption)
- A pinch of table salt (contains sodium and chloride)

In glass # 2, mix:

- 8 ounces of water (carbonated or boiled)

- ¼ Tsp baking soda (contains sodium bicarbonate)

Take turns drinking from each glass until your thirst is quenched. You can also have carbonated drinks and water or tea made with boiled or carbonated water. Avoid solid foods and milk products until you feel better. Infants should breastfeed and/or receive water while taking these mixtures.

Avoid dairy products, caffeine, very hot or cold liquids, spicy or fatty foods, and high fiber foods. They may make symptoms worse.

Use medicines, as needed.

Pepto-Bismol[®] and Imodium[®] have been shown to be useful in the treatment of TD. If you have diarrhea, start with Pepto-Bismol[®] tablets. Talk with a member of your health care team about using it if you are allergic to aspirin or take aspirin or compounds which contain aspirin. Stop taking it if symptoms persist after 1 to 2 doses. If Pepto-Bismol[®] doesn't work, take Imodium[®] plus an antibiotic. Do not use Imodium[®] if you have blood in your stools or a fever.

- Antibiotics have been shown to shorten the length of TD. They are most often used if no response is obtained from Pepto-Bismol[®] or Imodium[®]. Antibiotics can be taken along with Imodium.
- Antiperistaltic agents (like lomotil) do **not** prevent TD and may hide symptoms of diarrhea. This may lead to complications.
- There is no vaccine offered in the United States for TD at this time. But there are some being studied.

Caution: If TD doesn't improve with the above treatments or if you have a high fever, abdominal pain, or bloody

diarrhea, seek medical help. Also, call your health care clinic if TD lasts longer than 1 week after you return home.

Hepatitis

The risk of Hepatitis A for those who travel abroad varies. It depends on your living conditions, the rate of Hepatitis A in the places you visit, and the length of your stay.

When your travel is short and involves tourist routes in developed countries, you may be at no greater risk than when you travel in the U.S. Those who stay in the tropics or in countries where Hepatitis A is common and where they may be exposed are at greater risk of getting Hepatitis A. The Hepatitis A vaccine with its booster shot will protect you from Hepatitis A.

Think about getting the Hepatitis B vaccine if you will be in the tropics or developing countries for at least 1 month, are doing medical work there, plan to be sexually active with people who are native to the area, or will be doing things that put you at risk for accidents. Getting tattoos, acupuncture or other medical procedures while abroad will also put you at risk for getting Hepatitis B. The Hepatitis B vaccine consists of three shots given over 6 months.

For those who need Hepatitis A and B, a combined vaccine can be given. If you have questions about other types of hepatitis, ask a member of your health care team.

If You Need Medical Care Abroad

Travel agents of the American Embassy or Consulate may be able to provide names of hospitals, doctors, or emergency services. The International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (IAMAT) can provide a list of English-speaking doctors (**716-754-4883**). Contact your insurance

company before you leave home to check what will be covered during travel. Even if you are covered, you may have to use cash for these bills and be repaid later. Not all foreign medical centers accept credit cards. Traveler's health insurance can be purchased and is strongly advised if you have a chronic illness or are over 65.

Consider buying medical evacuation insurance, especially if you have a chronic disease, will be doing activities that increase risk for accidents or are traveling to a rabies endemic area.

Motion Sickness

You can try to avoid motion sickness or sea sickness by taking anti-motion-sickness medicines before you get in the car, boat or airplane. Many can be bought over-the-counter. Some need to be prescribed. Discuss options with your health care team.

Health Problems for Pregnant Women

Discuss your travel plans with your doctor or midwife. The problems that a pregnant woman might face are mostly the same as those of other travelers. To prevent any problems, plan ahead. Some vaccines and medicines may not be taken by pregnant women.

Handicapped Travelers

There are many internet sites and books about travel with disabilities. Examples include: www.disabled-world.com and travel.state.gov/travel/tips/tips_5967.html. If you are flying, you can also contact your airline for more help.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs or STDs)

Be aware that the risk of STIs (such as HIV, Chlamydia, and gonorrhea) is high in some areas of the world. AIDS and HIV have

become a global health problem. Their rates in high-risk groups keep rising. The high-risk groups may differ throughout the world. If you choose to have sex, you should practice safe sex to reduce your risk. To practice safe sex, you should:

- Use latex condoms.
- Avoid having sex with more than one partner, anonymous partners, and prostitutes.
- Avoid having sex with persons who have more than one sex partner.
- Avoid having sex with someone who is an IV drug user.

Environmental Effects

Common Concerns

You may have stresses that make you prone to illness, such as a change in your eating and drinking habits, crowding, and time changes. “Jet lag” may disturb your sleep pattern and wake cycles. These stresses can lead to nausea, indigestion, fatigue, and insomnia. Getting used to these stresses may take a week or more. If you’re concerned, ask for more facts on jet lag.

Altitude

Travel at high altitudes may lead to headache, insomnia, and nausea, even in young healthy people. It may cause more severe distress to those with heart or lung disease. It is hard to predict who will suffer from altitude problems such as acute mountain sickness. At greatest risk are those who ascend quickly to higher altitudes. There are medicines to help with this problem. Drink plenty of fluids. Talk to your health care provider if you feel you are at risk for getting acute mountain sickness.

Sun

The ultraviolet (UV) rays of the sun can cause severe sunburn, mainly in lighter skinned persons. Avoid excess contact with the sun to prevent sunburn and heat exhaustion. Choose a sun block with the proper SPF level and one that covers both UVA and UVB rays. Apply the sun block to cool, dry skin before going out. You may need to re-apply later. Bonding base formula sun blocks work best. Products that do not dissolve in water should be used if you are going to be swimming. It’s best to use a separate insect repellent. Sun block should be applied before the insect repellent. Some medicines increase your risk of getting sunburn. Talk to your health care provider to see if you are taking any of them.

Accidents

Car and other accidents lead the list of major causes of severe injury or loss of life when one travels. Defensive driving is the best way to prevent any problems. Always use safety belts. Avoid driving after drinking or riding with someone who has been drinking. Try to avoid nighttime driving. Never drive at night in unknown regions. Check rental cars to be sure the headlights work and there is enough fuel. Prepare ahead by learning the rules of the road for the places you plan to visit. You should wear helmets while biking or on motorcycles.

Swimming

Swimming in dirty water may result in skin, eye, ear, and certain intestinal infections, especially if one's head is submerged. Schistosomiasis, which is caused by a parasite, is more common in some countries. Symptoms begin as soon as 2 to 3 weeks after being exposed. Seek medical care if you think you have been exposed.

Symptoms include: itching, abdominal pain, diarrhea, and bloody, frequent or painful urination. A rule of thumb is that only pools that have been treated with chlorine can be thought of as safe places to swim.

Animal Hazards

In places where rabies exists, domestic dogs, cats, or other animals (such as monkeys) should not be touched. Avoid contact with wild animals. Talk with your health care provider about whether you need the rabies vaccine before your trip. If you get bitten by an animal, wash the wound out well with soap and water and seek health care right away. You may need to a shot to prevent getting rabies.

The bites and stings of some insects may cause bad reactions and transmit diseases (such as yellow fever, malaria, dengue fever, and Japanese encephalitis). Some insects are active during the day and some are active during the night. Some insects can bite and transmit disease without the person being aware of the bite. Use insect repellents, protective clothing, and mosquito netting should in many parts of the world.

Poisonous snakes are hazards in many places. Boots should be worn when walking, especially at night when snakes tend to be more active. Inspect and shake clothing and shoes before putting them on. Always do this in the morning.

Cruise Ship Sanitation

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control is in charge of a vessel sanitation program designed to decrease the chances for disease outbreaks. A list of cruise ship inspection results and/or the last report of a certain cruise boat may be obtained from the Office of the Chief, Vessel Sanitation Activity, Center for Environmental Health and Injury

Control, 1015 North American Way, Room 107, Miami, Florida 33132.

Malaria

Malaria in humans is spread through the bite of an infected mosquito. The risk of getting malaria varies. Symptoms include:

- Intermittent fever and flu-like symptoms.
- Chills.
- Headache, muscle aches, and pains.
- Fatigue.
- Heart, kidney failure, and death can occur rarely.

Symptoms of malaria can begin as early as 8 days after first being exposed in places where malaria exists. It can occur as late as months after leaving. The best way to cure malaria is to treat it early in the course of the disease. Do not delay treatment. Those with symptoms of malaria should seek prompt medical treatment.

Reduce Contact with Mosquitoes

Because the mosquitoes that transmit malaria feed at night, your chance of being bitten increases between dusk and dawn. To reduce contact during those times, you should:

- Remain in well-screened areas.
- Use mosquito nets. The best are those infused with permethrin. You may also want to treat your clothes with permethrin before you travel. Permethrin kills mosquitos, lyme ticks, and some other insects on contact.
- Wear clothes that cover most of your body.
- Avoid bright colors.
- Use insect repellent on exposed skin. The best ones contain N, N diethylmetatoluamide (DEET). The percent of DEET in them varies

(ranging up to 95%). Experts now advise using DEET between 10 and 30% and not using DEET stronger than 50 to 55%. Severe adverse effects from DEET are rare.

- Purchase a flying insect spray to use in living and sleeping areas during evening and nighttime hours. It is best to purchase these agents before your trip. Check www.tsa.gov for up to date information on what needs to be in checked luggage and what you can take in your carryon.
- Picaridin at 20% or greater may also be helpful. It has been used in the U.S. since 2005. Some studies show that it works as well as DEET, but its long-term safety is not known.
- These measures will also help protect against dengue fever, yellow fever, and chikungunya which are passed by infected day-time biting mosquitoes and Japanese encephalitis which is passed by an infected evening-time biting mosquito.

People who go to parts of the world where malaria exists are advised to use the proper drug treatment. Malaria prevention uses drugs to try to prevent getting the disease. Treatment begins 2 to 14 days before travel and extends for 1 to 4 weeks after leaving depending on the drug being used. You must keep taking the medicine after you leave the area to prevent infection in the liver. Your doctor or nurse will discuss this with you and help you decide what would work best for you based on your travel plans and health history. You can get malaria even if you are taking these medicines. If any illness with fever occurs, you need to get help right away.

If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, or traveling with children, you may also want to consult your healthcare provider for both you and your children before you travel. An overdose of these drugs can be fatal. They need to be stored in childproof bottles out of the reach of children.

After you leave the area and finish your medicine, a delayed malaria attack may occur within a few months or up to a year. Seek care if you are sick with a fever after leaving an area where malaria exists. Be sure to tell your health care team where you traveled in order to help decide if you may have malaria. The CDC 24-hour hotline number **(404) 639-1610** may be used to update you on malaria facts.

Flying

Drink plenty of fluids and limit alcohol and caffeine when taking long plane trips. To prevent blood clots (DVT's, Deep Vein Thrombosis), do leg stretches often and get up and move around the plane when you can. Some people may use compression stockings to help the blood flow in their legs.

Safety Concerns

Many people have a false sense of security in foreign countries. Theft may be common in some places. Check with hotel staff, police, or the American Embassy or Consulate staff about any dangers. Travel in groups to avoid problems. There are certain places where Americans may be at risk for terrorist attacks or being kidnapped. The State Department **(202) 647-5225** will provide callers with a travel advisory about any country. They can also give safety tips for foreign travel, and the names, addresses, and phone numbers of Foreign Services. Leave valuables at home. Be sure someone at home knows your full travel plans.

Other Issues

People who have chronic illness should carry each of their medicines with them instead of in their checked luggage. Keep them in their original bottles and take extra pills. Carry a list of your medicines; include brand and generic names.

A complete physical exam may also be worthwhile before travel. Make sure you've also seen your dentist before you leave.

Watch your diet, stress level, activity level, and use of alcohol during your trip.

You may not be able to find medical supplies in many countries. Take along a medical kit. Include cold and pain medicines, Band-Aids[®], an antiseptic and a thermometer.

Avoid unsterile injections. In most countries, also avoid blood transfusions.

Take an extra pair of glasses or lens prescription. Contact lens users should take along enough cleaning solution and carry a pair of eyeglasses. You may wish to just wear glasses.

Carry a card, tag, or bracelet listing any illness which may need emergency care. A letter from a member of your health care team or a copy of your EKG may also be helpful.

Even healthy travelers need to get the flu vaccine, especially if going on a cruise ship.

After Your Trip

Some diseases may not be obvious right away. If you become ill after you return home, call your health care clinic to report any travel in the past 12 months.

Online Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/travel

International Society of Travel Medicine
www.istm.org

Travel Health Online
www.tripprep.com

World Health Organization
www.who.org

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References

Advice for Travelers. *Medical Letter*, November 19, 2018, Issue 1560.

Health Information for International Travel, 2020. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Centers for Disease Control.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 7/2019. University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing HF#4294.