



Here for *your* health.

Responsibilities of Travelers

Each traveler needs to realize the value of health and the risks that international travel may pose. This does not mean that people should not travel, but just as in any other activity in life, the experience will be more enjoyable if travelers are adequately prepared and equipped with the knowledge of how to protect their health. Studies have shown that the majority of travelers from the United States and other countries do not seek pre-travel health advice. In addition, it is every traveler's responsibility to weigh the personal risk versus benefits of a particular itinerary. Some prefer to travel knowing they have little risk for illness outside the ordinary. Others seek adventure despite its risks; and even travelers with chronic illness may understand the serious nature of the risks taken at the expense of exacerbating life-threatening underlying diseases. It is critical that the health-care provider understand the traveler's health risk tolerance and discuss openly with the traveler the wisdom of a particular itinerary.

The importance of asking questions and gathering information cannot be over-emphasized. In several recent studies, results have shown that a small portion of travelers do not even report seeking general information about their travel destination. If a traveler is using a travel agency or tour operator, it is helpful to ask questions to find out as much information about the trip as possible. Regardless of whether travelers are planning their own trips or joining a tour group, travelers should know as many details as possible about their modes of travel, their travel destinations, lodging, food, and activities during the trip.

Travelers should make certain that there is enough time to see a health-care provider and obtain any necessary vaccinations before they travel. Far less than half of all travelers who seek pre-travel health advice report obtaining information from a travel medicine specialist/travel clinic, and usually a slightly greater portion report seeking this information from their general practitioner/family doctor. Ideally, travelers should see a health-care professional about 4-6 weeks before traveling, giving an optimal amount of time for any necessary vaccines; however, if a trip is scheduled in one week or even in one day, it is always beneficial to try to seek travel health advice from an expert. A helpful resource is the travel medicine clinics section of the CDC Travelers' Health website www.cdc.gov/travel. That web page contains links to two professional medical organizations that provide travel clinic directories that can help travelers locate a convenient clinic. In addition, local or county health departments often have travel

medicine clinics and can provide pre-travel consultations. The CDC Travelers' Health website also maintains a Yellow Fever Vaccination Clinic Registry of facilities that can provide yellow fever vaccinations for travelers who need them.

Before seeing a health-care provider, it is helpful to visit the CDC Travelers' Health website for health information. The website is kept current with latest recommendations concerning outbreaks of diseases around the world and other health-related situations, such as effects of natural disasters. The information provided in this text and on the website, along with that from a travel health advisor, will equip travelers with what they need to know to remain as healthy as possible.

One of the most important ways that travelers can protect themselves is to be prepared with helpful details when they see their health-care provider. Remember that travel health advice should be individually tailored to the person. Two travelers to Thailand may be provided different vaccines, medications, and detailed advice during their visits to the same clinic. For example, the business traveler to Bangkok with underlying heart disease staying at a 5-star resort has different risks from those of the healthy refugee camp worker who will travel throughout northern Thailand on the Cambodian border.

There is no way to include every question in this checklist that may pertain to all travelers, but the following items can be a great starting point of information for each person preparing to travel. The subject matter of these questions corresponds with the published body of knowledge in travel medicine.

Questions for Persons Preparing to Travel

When and where are you traveling? How long will you be at each location?

- In what countries will you be traveling?
- Where within the country or countries will you be traveling?
- Are these destinations urban areas or rural areas?
- What are the conditions of your lodging (such as hotel with air conditioning, screened cabin, or open-air tents)?
- What activities will you be doing while traveling (such as hiking, backpacking, scuba diving, sightseeing, etc.)?

Have you traveled internationally in the past?

- Where did you go?
- When did you travel?

How old are you?

What vaccinations have you had previously?

- When did you have these vaccinations?

- How many doses did you have of a particular vaccine? (for example, some vaccines, such as the hepatitis A and B vaccines or the measles/mumps/rubella—MMR—vaccine, require multiple doses for long-term protection)
- Did you have any allergies or reactions to any previous vaccines?

Do you have any other allergies (for example, medications, foods, or environmental)?

- In particular, do you have an allergy to eggs, latex, yeast, mercury, or thimerosal?

What is your medical history and current health status (for example, past illnesses and surgeries, chronic health problems, or other underlying medical conditions)?

What medications are you currently taking or have you taken in the past 3 months?

Are you immune deficient?

If you are a female:

- Are you pregnant now?
- Are you trying to become pregnant, or will you try to become pregnant in the next 3 months?
- Are you breast-feeding?

Even with travel advice, vaccines, and medication protection, a person is not 100% protected against all diseases, and no preventive measures are 100% effective. There are many diseases for which there are no preventive vaccines or medications. Therefore, a wise traveler will remember that safe food and water precautions and hand hygiene, along with measures against insect and mosquito bites, are important ways of preventing many common travel illnesses. The CDC Travelers' Health website can help inform travelers of ways to prevent illness and protect against injury.

Travelers' Health Kit

The purpose of a Travel Kit is twofold: to allow the traveler to take care of minor health problems as they occur and to treat exacerbations of pre-existing medical conditions. Persons with pre-existing conditions, such as diabetes or allergies to insect stings or medications, should consider wearing an alert bracelet and making sure this information is on a card in their wallet and with their other travel documents. A variety of health kits are available commercially and may even be purchased over the Internet; however, similar kits can be assembled at home. The specific contents of the health kit are based on destination, duration of travel, type of travel, and the traveler's pre-existing medical conditions. Basic items that should be included are listed below.

Medications

Personal prescription medications should be in their original containers. Copies of all prescriptions should be carried, including the generic names for medications, and a note from the prescribing physician on letterhead stationery for controlled substances and injectable medications.

- Antimalarial medications, if applicable
- Over-the-counter antidiarrheal medication (e.g., bismuth subsalicylate, loperamide)
- Antibiotic for self-treatment of moderate to severe diarrhea
- Antihistamine
- Decongestant, alone or in combination with antihistamine
- Anti-motion sickness medication
- Acetaminophen, aspirin, ibuprofen, or other medication for pain or fever
- Mild laxative
- Cough suppressant/expectorant
- Throat lozenges
- Antacid
- Antifungal and antibacterial ointments or creams
- 1% hydrocortisone cream
- Epinephrine auto-injector (e.g., EpiPen), especially if history of severe allergic reaction. Also available in smaller-dose package for children.

Other Important Items

- Insect repellent containing DEET (up to 50%)
- Sunscreen (preferably SPF 15 or greater)
- Aloe gel for sunburns
- Digital thermometer
- Oral rehydration solution packets
- Basic first-aid items (adhesive bandages, gauze, ace wrap, antiseptic, tweezers, scissors, cotton-tipped applicators)
- Antibacterial hand wipes or alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol
- Moleskin for blisters
- Lubricating eye drops
- First aid quick reference card

Other items that may be useful in certain circumstances:

- Mild sedative (e.g., zolpidem) or other sleep aid
- Anti-anxiety medication
- High-altitude preventive medication
- Water purification tablets
- Commercial suture/syringe kits (to be used by local health-care provider. These items will also require a letter from the prescribing physician on letterhead stationery.)

- Latex condoms
- Address and phone numbers of area hospitals or clinics

Commercial medical kits are available for a wide range of circumstances, from basic first aid to advanced emergency life support. Many outdoor sporting goods stores sell their own basic first aid kits. For more adventurous travelers, a number of companies produce advanced medical kits and will even customize kits based on specific travel needs. In addition, specialty kits are available for managing diabetes, dealing with dental emergencies, and handling aquatic environments. If travelers choose to purchase a health kit rather than assemble their own, they should be certain to review the contents of the kit carefully to ensure that it has everything needed; additional items may be necessary.

Below is a list of websites supplying a wide range of medical kits. There are many suppliers, and this list is not meant to be all inclusive.

[Adventure Medical Kits](#)
[Chinook Medical Gear](#)
[Harris International Health Care](#)
[Travel Medicine, Inc.](#)
[Wilderness Medicine Outfitters](#)

A final reminder: a health kit is useful only if it is available. It should be carried with the traveler at all times, e.g., in carry-on baggage when allowable, and on excursions. All medications, especially prescription medications, should be stored in carry-on baggage, in their original containers with clear labels. With heightened airline security, sharp objects and some liquids and gels will have to remain in checked luggage.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health Information for International Travel 2008. Atlanta: US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, 2007.

International travel: Staying healthy far from home

International travel can be the adventure of a lifetime. Whether you visit the great cities of the world or explore the most remote locales on the planet, the rewards can be unforgettable. But though the rewards of travel abroad can be significant, you may also encounter risks to your health. Getting the right vaccines before you travel, packing the proper medications and planning ahead are all things you can do to ensure a safe and healthy trip.

How risky is it?

Most people who travel to major cities and stay in clean, well-maintained hotels don't get sick. Those who do often come down with common complaints — colds, bronchitis, diarrhea. The risk of more serious illnesses such as malaria and yellow fever depends on when and where you travel, how long you stay, and what kinds of precautions you take. Here are some practical steps that can help you stay healthy.

Plan ahead

You may not need much more than carry-on luggage for a weekend in London, but longer stays in remote places require some advance planning.

- **Learn about vaccinations.** Start by visiting the Web sites of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO) or the U.S. State Department's Overseas Citizens Services. These sites can tell you which vaccines are recommended or mandatory for the countries you plan to visit. It's best to find out about vaccines at least six weeks in advance. That's because it may take several weeks for immunity to develop, and you may need more than one dose of the vaccine for full protection. Certain malaria drugs also need to be started two weeks before you travel.

Keep in mind that no vaccines exist for some of the world's most life-threatening infections, including HIV/AIDS and malaria. And the vaccines you do receive aren't 100 percent effective at preventing illness. You still must take common-sense precautions to avoid getting sick.

A word of caution: Some vaccines and antimalarials aren't appropriate for infants and children, pregnant women, or people with chronic medical conditions. Others can cause severe side effects even in otherwise healthy people. Discuss the risks and benefits of any vaccine with your doctor before being immunized.

- **Have vaccinations verified.** If you receive any vaccines, ask your doctor, travel medicine clinic or health department for an immunization certificate standardized by the WHO. And if you're allergic to any mandatory vaccines, get a medical waiver on your doctor's letterhead stationery.

- **Malaria protection.** Take extra precautions if you'll be traveling for more than six months to countries where malaria is common. Studies show that travelers who spend extended periods of time in countries where malaria is prevalent have a higher risk of getting the disease than do those who stay for shorter periods. During a long stay, travelers are more likely to stop taking malaria medication and to ignore or minimize the importance of seasonal treatment. Be sure to take an adequate supply of malaria medication with you. Counterfeit drugs are common in the developing world.
- **Take a summary of your medical history.** Make several copies of an abbreviated version of your medical records. In case of an emergency, you may need copies for the medical professionals caring for you.
- **Update the usual suspects.** Talk to your doctor about updating routine immunizations such as tetanus, pneumonia, polio, influenza and measles-mumps-rubella — diseases that are still a threat in some parts of the world.

Be prepared

"Expect the best, but prepare for the worst" should be the official travelers' motto. Planning what to do if you have an accident or become ill could save your life.

- **Check your health insurance policy.** Find out ahead of time how your health insurance handles medical care when you travel abroad. Although some insurance companies will pay for "reasonable" hospital costs abroad, very few will cover medical evacuation, which can cost as much as \$100,000. In most cases, Medicare won't cover you outside the United States. For these reasons, consider purchasing a supplemental policy that guarantees medical payments and transport. You may also want to inquire about insurance that covers the cost of returning the remains of a loved one who passes away overseas. Without insurance, this can be very difficult. If you have an underlying medical condition, research travel insurance companies carefully. Policies may vary considerably in their coverage of pre-existing illnesses. A complete list of these companies is available at the U.S. Department of State Web site.
- **Know where to go.** Bring a list of recommended hospitals along your route. This is more important if you will be traveling for an extended period of time. You can often get this information from your doctor, local or state medical society, the International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers, or the U.S. State Department's Overseas Citizens Services. A definitive medical reference, the Official ABMS Directory of Board Certified Medical Specialists, may be available in your local library. Several private organizations such as International SOS and MEDEX will provide medical information and insurance for a fee. If you forget to do your homework, most major credit card companies and U.S. embassies and consulates can steer you in the right direction. When in doubt or the timing is critical, consider going to a university hospital for help.

- **Bring a copy of your prescription.** If you use prescription drugs, it's a good idea to bring along an extra prescription in case your medication is lost or stolen. But be sure your doctor indicates both the brand name and the generic name of the drug. Depending on where you are, medications with the same brand name may have very different active ingredients. In addition, when purchasing medication abroad it may help to tell the pharmacist the disease or condition the drug is designed to treat. This may help ensure that you'll get the correct medication.
- **Take special precautions for a chronic illness.** If you have a chronic illness, such as cardiovascular disease, hepatitis, diabetes or HIV/AIDS, you may be at increased risk when you travel. Be sure to carry the name of your doctor and contact details, information about your condition and any medications you take, and a letter from your doctor certifying that you need certain drugs or medical items such as syringes — anything that might raise a red flag going through customs and security checkpoints.

Pack carefully

Here are some things to consider:

- **Pack extra supplies of prescription medicines.** Bring your medication with you — it can be challenging to get prescriptions filled abroad. Divide medications between your carry-on bag and checked luggage in case of loss or theft. Keep prescription drugs in their original bottles with typed labels. The name on the labels must match the name on your identification, or you won't be allowed to bring the bottles onboard.
- **Take a basic first-aid kit.** Include pain relievers, antibiotic ointment, anti-diarrheal medication and bandages. Also pack sunscreen, extra prescription eyewear and motion sickness medication if you use it. These items may be expensive or in short supply in foreign countries.
- **Bring hand wipes and hand sanitizers.** Pack disposable hand wipes or an alcohol-based hand gel containing at least 60 percent alcohol for times when soap and water aren't available. They kill most germs and are safe for children.
- **Check security precautions.** Security precautions can change often and may vary with your destination. Check with your airline to determine what items you can safely take on the plane with you.

Use common sense

To be safe, avoid the following:

- Food from street vendors
- Raw or undercooked meat
- Dairy products and any foods likely to contain raw or undercooked eggs, such as ice cream, hollandaise sauce and Caesar salad dressing

- Raw fruits and vegetables that you can't peel yourself, such as grapes, berries and lettuce
- Tap water, water from unsealed bottles and drinks with ice cubes

Post-trip illness

Travelers who pick up infections overseas usually become ill in the first 12 weeks after they return home. Some diseases, such as malaria, may not cause problems until six months to a year later, however, and may occur even if you took antimalarial medication.

If you get sick, be sure to tell your doctor when and where you traveled. If you don't get better or can't get a clear diagnosis, consider consulting a doctor who specializes in international or travel medicine.

[By Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

Nov 20, 2006

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