

# **MEDICAL ADVICE**

## **GUIDELINES FOR STAYING HEALTHY**

You can greatly reduce the risk of medical problems by combining common sense with a bit of preparation. The health hazards encountered by foreign travelers can be grouped into three major categories:

1. Diseases transmitted by food and water;
2. Illnesses transmitted by insect or animal bites; and
3. Conditions associated with physical or environmental factors.

This section provides useful guidelines for avoiding or alleviating common problems in each of these categories.

## **PRECAUTIONS WHILE TRAVELING (Food and Water)**

FOOD - One of the joys of traveling is sampling local foods. These pleasures may cause diarrhea, unless safeguards are taken. It is best to be skeptical of all foods, even meals which are served in the fanciest hotel restaurants.

DO: Order meat well done (this ensures that bacteria and parasite cysts are killed)

DO: Eat only food served to your table hot.

DO: Eat fruit that you peel yourself.

DO: Eat hard-boiled eggs if the shells are intact.

DON'T: Eat raw vegetables, salads, or leafy greens; the water used to wash them may be unsafe.

DON'T: Eat custards, cream pastries, mayonnaise, or salad dressings (may result in food poisoning).

DON'T: Eat raw fish (sushi, sashimi) or seafood (may result in dysentery or hepatitis).

DON'T: Eat sausage, dried, pickled, highly-spiced or salted foods (these processes do not ensure protection from bacteria or parasites).

DON'T: Eat food from street vendors.

## **WATER AND BEVERAGES**

Diarrhea is well known as the scourge of the foreign traveler. Called by many names--La Tourista, Delhi Belly, Montezuma's Revenge, Turkey Trots, etc. — this malady is both common and avoidable. The various bacteria, viruses, and occasional parasites that cause the typical symptoms of abdominal cramps, nausea, and diarrhea are contracted through contaminated food and water. Your trip will be short, it is possible to greatly reduce the risk of developing severe diarrhea by following a few simple rules.

DO: Assume that all water in developing countries is unsafe.

DO: Treat potentially unsafe water by either boiling for 10 minutes or chemically treating with chlorine (one Hal zone tablet or two drops of Clorox to one quart) or tincture of iodine (two drops to one quart).

DO: Drink lots of tea or coffee: wine, beer, carbonated beverages with familiar (not local) trademarks; and mineral water. Wipe all the residual water droplets from the outside of the bottle or container.

DO: Brush teeth with purified water.

DON'T: Drink tap water. (The hot water tap is an exception; if it is intolerably hot to touch, it is probably safe to drink when cool.)

DON'T: Drink water from bulk storage on planes and trains, or water left in carafes or pitchers in hotel rooms.

DON'T: Drink cloudy water, even if it has been boiled or treated with chemicals.

DON'T: Drink any beverage with ice unless you are absolutely sure that the ice has been prepared from purified water.

DON'T: Drink milk or eat milk products (cheese, ice cream) unless you are in a country with the highest standards of hygiene. (Canned or condensed milk is safe.)

DON'T: Swim in water that may be contaminated by sewage discharge.

## **INSECT AND ANIMAL BITES**

### **ANIMAL BITES**

Any bite by a wild or "domestic" animal in any developing country constitutes a medical emergency. Complications range from local wound infection to tetanus or the possibility of rabies.

DO: Seek medical attention as soon as possible after the bite has occurred.

DO: Carefully clean the wound with soap and water.  
DON'T: Pet or approach any stray animal.  
DON'T: Go near bat roosts or areas where bats feed at night.

## **INSECTS**

Many illnesses are transmitted by the bites of mosquitoes, flies, ticks, and mites. Some (yellow fever, malaria) can be prevented or treated by vaccination or medication; others can be avoided only by minimizing exposure to the insects. In addition, the bites of many insects (especially bees, wasps, and spiders) are quite painful and may cause severe local inflammation or life-threatening allergic reactions. If you are traveling in an area infested with insects, the following suggestions will help reduce your exposure.

DO: Obtain a prescription for malaria pills (Aralen, chloroquine, doxycycline and/or Fansidar) from your doctor.  
DO: Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants after dusk; most mosquitoes that carry malaria feed at night.  
DO: Use insect repellent liberally (Cutter's, Off).  
DO: Sleep inside nylon insect netting (preferably 16 x 18 mesh).  
DO: Carefully remove all ticks (including the head portion) by placing a drop of gasoline, alcohol, or tincture of iodine on the tick.  
DO: Consider a daily dose of thiamine (Vitamin B<sup>12</sup>) which may act as a "natural" insect repellent for some people.  
DO: Carry a bee-sting allergy kit at all times if you have a previous history of severe reaction to bee or wasp venom.  
DON'T: Wear perfumes or fragrant lotions.

## **SNAKEBITE**

The average traveler will not encounter snakes. Those planning extensive travel on foot in bush, desert, or jungle areas should be aware of the local species of snakes, their habitats, and their behavior. If medical assistance will not be immediately available to a snakebite victim, add a snakebite kit to your general medical kit.

## **ALTITUDE SICKNESS**

Consult with an experienced trekker or mountaineer before venturing to high altitudes. The most common effects of the lower oxygen levels at high altitudes include fatigue, nausea, palpitations, loss of appetite, and severe headache. Hallucinations, swelling of the face and extremities, and lung or brain edema may occur, but these are rare.

DO: Adapt to high altitude by taking two days to reach 8,000 feet and stay at that altitude until symptoms decrease.  
DO: Limit exertion during the adaptation period.  
DO: Treat any symptoms of lung congestion (cough, shortness of breath) or brain swelling (severe headache, drowsiness, loss of consciousness) with oxygen and rapid descent to lower altitudes.  
DON'T: Use sleeping pills or sedating pain pills for sleep; these will suppress breathing and worsen the symptoms.

## **JET LAG**

Symptoms are caused by travel to a markedly different time zone without adequate time for adjustment of the body's "biologic clock". Symptoms include fatigue, irritability, headache, and decreased ability to concentrate. Travel from east to west is less likely to cause jet lag than trips from west to east, as it is apparently easier for the body to adapt to a longer day.

DO: Plan a stop-over to break up a long flight.  
DO: Anticipate the new time zone by going to sleep progressively earlier each day for three to four days before a west-to-east flight (reverse the pattern for an east-to-west flight).  
DO: Fly during the day on long flights.  
DO: Increase intake of non-alcoholic fluids.  
DON'T: Drink alcohol or eat excessively for the first two days after a long flight.  
DON'T: Drink alcohol or coffee on the flight.

## **MOTION SICKNESS**

Those who are prone to motion or sea sickness are probably able to predict the situations where symptoms will occur. Most people have fewer problems with air travel.

DO: Recline to a horizontal position and limit head movement.  
DO: Obtain a prescription of anti-vertigo (motion sickness) medication from a physician (dexamethasone-scopolamine, Antivert, Transderm. Dramamine).  
DON'T: Suppress the urge to vomit; this will provide temporary relief from the nausea.  
DON'T: Read or watch movies during travel.  
DON'T: Look out windows of trains, buses, or cars.

## SUN AND HEAT

The intense sunlight, heat, and humidity of the tropics are quite uncomfortable for those accustomed to more temperate climates. Over-exposure may lead to serious medical problems including severe sunburn, sunstroke, or heat exhaustion. Travelers who are elderly, have fair complexions, or have heart disease are more subject to the effects of hot weather.

DO: Increase intake of fluids and salt. (Consult your physician for any specific restriction of salt intake.)

DO: Wear a sunscreen lotion.

DO: Wear loose-fitting, light-colored clothing (preferably cotton).

DO: Wear a well-ventilated, wide-brimmed hat.

DO: Limit sun exposure and physical exertion on the first few days of the trip.

DON'T: Drink alcoholic beverages in excess.

DON'T: Wear synthetic fabrics, nylon hose, or rubber-soled shoes.

## COMMON MEDICAL SYNDROMES (Diarrhea and Dysentery)

There is a 10-40 percent likelihood that you will experience diarrhea on your trip, especially if you are traveling to Mexico, Peru, Morocco, Kenya, Egypt, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Thailand, Taiwan, Greece or Spain. Most travelers develop symptoms during the first 10-14 days of a trip, although some do not become ill until they have returned to the U.S.

Many different bacteria, viruses, and parasites can produce diarrhea or dysentery. These micro-organisms are transmitted in contaminated food and water. Two distinct types of illnesses may occur.

1. Watery diarrhea often occurs without fever or systemic illness. It is caused by "toxigenic" E. coli, Vibrio cholera (cholera bacillus), rotavirus, and (occasionally) Giardia.
2. Dysentery is characterized by fever, chills, headache, abdominal cramps, and a slight-to-moderate loose stool containing blood or pus. Dysentery is caused by Shigella, "invasive" E. coli, Salmonella, Campylobacter, and amoeba.

## PREVENTION

1. Follow precautions for Food, Water and Beverages, pages 1
2. Wash your hands frequently, especially before eating (consider using medicated hand wipes)
3. Take one of the following compounds
  - a. Bismuth subsalicylate (Pepto-Bismol) — two tablets, two to four times daily, or
  - b. Doxycycline (Vibramycin) — one tablet, every day, or
  - c. Trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (Bactrim, Septra) — one double-strength tablet each day.

## SELF TREATMENT

1. Drink fluids containing glucose (sugar) and salt in quantities that at least equal the amount of diarrhea. The World Health Organization recommends adding the following ingredients to one quart of boiled water
  - 1/2 tsp. (3.5 gm) table salt (sodium chloride),
  - 1/2 tsp. (2.5 gm) baking soda (sodium bicarbonate),
  - 1/4 tsp. (1.5 gm) salt substitute (potassium),
  - 4 T. (20.0 gm) sugarGatorade is also a reasonable sugar/electrolyte replacement.

2. Bismuth subsalicylate (Pepto-Bismol): 2-3 tablets every half-hour for 8 doses (total of 16-20 tablets in 4 hours).
3. Reduce activity; avoid heat and sunshine.
4. As a last resort, take Lomotil or Imodium. Take no more than three or four tablets of either medication in any 24-hour period. Do not take these medications if you have fever, chills, or stools containing blood or pus.

Caution: Use antibiotics only on the advice of a physician.

## SEE A PHYSICIAN

- if stool contains blood or pus, or
- if diarrhea lasts more than 5-7 days, or
- if chills and fever last more than 36 hours, or
- if diarrhea is very frequent (every 30 minutes) and large volume, or
- if significant dizziness or fainting occurs when arising from a sitting or lying position.

## **FEVER**

Although the diagnosis may be nothing more than a common viral infection, fever and chills without diarrhea or respiratory symptoms may indicate a serious illness. Several tropical illnesses must be carefully considered — including malaria, amoebiasis, typhoid, fever, hepatitis, filariasis, brucellosis, schistosomiasis, and tuberculosis -- particularly for anyone who has traveled through, or recently returned from South American, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, India, or Africa.

## **PREVENTION**

Follow precautions for Food, Water and Beverages, and Insects, pages 1 and 2.

## **SELF TREATMENT**

Take aspirin or acetaminophen.

**(Do not use antibiotics for self treatment.)**

SEE A PHYSICIAN AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, especially if a high fever, lasting more than 24 to 48 hours, is associated with severe chills, delirium, dark or bloody urine, or easy bruising. Give the doctor a detailed account of your trip to allow an accurate assessment of potential exposures and appropriate diagnostic tests.

## **RESPIRATORY ILLNESSES**

Upper and lower respiratory tract infections are nearly as common as diarrhea on overseas trips. The likelihood of contracting a respiratory infection is greatest during the winter months in large urban areas of China, India, Japan, and Western Europe.

Common symptoms include sore throat, nasal congestion, hoarseness, cough, and general fatigue, sometimes accompanied by aches and fever. Although 95 percent of all episodes are caused by virus and are transmitted by hand-to-mouth contact, strep throat occasionally produces similar symptoms.

## **PREVENTION**

Wash hands frequently.

(Note: Face masks probably are not effective for protection against the common viral illnesses.)

## **SELF TREATMENT**

Antipyretic/analgesics (aspirin or acetaminophen).

Decongestants, especially if traveling by air.

Anti-cough preparations.

**(Do not use antibiotics for self treatment.)**

SEE A PHYSICIAN if you develop any of these symptoms: cough with bloody sputum, fever higher than 102°, severe pleurisy (chest pain associated with breathing), or severe shortness of breath.

## **SKIN RASH**

A variety of skin problems may occur during a trip. The heat and humidity of tropical countries causes excessive perspiration, providing the perfect opportunity for fungal infection of the skin, particularly on the feet. In addition, parasitic infection may cause localized skin irritation early in the course of the illness. Mites and chiggers and various toxic plants also will produce an intensely itchy skin rash. A rash may also be caused by medications, especially those containing sulfa (Bactrim, Septra, Fansidar) or tetracycline.

## **PREVENTION**

1. Avoid rubber-soled, hot shoes.
2. Wear loose-fitting, cotton clothing.

**SELF TREATMENT**

- Desenex or tolnaftate powder may help reduce the symptoms of fungal infections.
- For dermatitis, use 0.5 hydrocortisone cream.
- Antihistamine "cold tablets" or calamine lotion may reduce or relieve itching.

**SEE A PHYSICIAN** if skin involvement becomes very severe, or if other symptoms such as a cough or fever develop.