

Health risks and precautions: general considerations

People in their home environment live in a state of equilibrium with the locally occurring strains of microorganisms and with the altitude and climatic conditions of the region. However, this is an unstable equilibrium that can be upset even in the home environment by factors such as the arrival of an unfamiliar micro-organism, seasonal changes in climate and unusually stressful situations. The many physical and environmental changes encountered during international travel may upset this equilibrium to an even greater extent: sudden exposure to significant changes in altitude, humidity, microbial flora and temperature, exacerbated by stress and fatigue, may result in ill-health and an inability to achieve the purpose of the journey. The risks associated with international travel are influenced by characteristics of the traveller (including age, sex and health status) and by characteristics of the travel (including destination, purpose and duration).

Forward planning, appropriate preventive measures and careful precautions can substantially reduce the risks of adverse health consequences. Although the medical profession and the travel industry can provide a great deal of help and advice, it is the traveller's responsibility to ask for information, to understand the risks involved, and to take the necessary precautions for the journey.

Travel-related risks

Key factors in determining the risks to which travellers may be exposed are:

- destination
- duration of visit
- purpose of visit
- standards of accommodation and food hygiene
- behaviour of the traveller.

Destinations where accommodation, hygiene and sanitation, medical care and water quality are of a high standard pose relatively few serious risks for the health of travellers, unless there is pre-existing illness. This applies to business

travellers and tourists visiting most major cities and tourist centres and staying in good-quality accommodation. In contrast, destinations where accommodation is of poor quality, hygiene and sanitation are inadequate, medical services do not exist, and clean water is unavailable may pose serious risks for the health of travellers. This applies, for example, to personnel from emergency relief and development agencies or tourists who venture into remote areas. In these settings, stringent precautions must be taken to avoid illness.

The duration of the visit and the behaviour and lifestyle of the traveller are important in determining the likelihood of exposure to many infectious agents and will influence decisions on the need for certain vaccinations or antimalarial medication. The duration of the visit may also determine whether the traveller may be subjected to marked changes in temperature and humidity during the visit, or to prolonged exposure to atmospheric pollution.

The purpose of the visit is critical in relation to the associated health risks. A business trip to a city, where the visit is spent in a hotel and/or conference centre of high standard, or a tourist trip to a well-organized resort, involves fewer risks than a visit to remote rural areas, whether for work or pleasure. However, behaviour also plays an important role; for example, going outdoors in the evenings in a malaria-endemic area without taking precautions may result in the traveller becoming infected with malaria. Exposure to insects, rodents or other animals, infectious agents and contaminated food and water, combined with the absence of appropriate medical facilities, makes travel in many remote regions particularly hazardous.

Medical consultation before travel

Travellers intending to visit a destination in a developing country should consult a travel medicine clinic or medical practitioner before the journey. This consultation should preferably take place 4–6 weeks before the journey, particularly if vaccination(s) may be required. However, last-minute travellers can also benefit from a medical consultation, even as late as the day before travel. This consultation will determine the need for any vaccinations and/or antimalarial medication, as well as any other medical items that the traveller may require. A basic medical kit will be prescribed or provided, supplemented as appropriate to meet individual needs.

A dental check-up is advisable before travel to developing countries or prolonged travel to remote areas. This is particularly important for people with chronic or recurrent dental problems.

Assessment of health risks associated with travel

Medical advisers base their recommendations, including those for vaccinations and other medication, on an assessment of risk for the individual traveller, which takes into account the likelihood of catching a disease and how serious this might be for the traveller concerned. Key elements of this risk assessment are the destination, duration and purpose of the visit, as well as the conditions of accommodation and the health status of the traveller.

For each disease being considered, an assessment is also made of:

- availability of prophylaxis, possible side-effects and suitability for the traveller concerned;
- any associated public health risks (e.g. the risk of infecting others).

Collecting the information required to make a risk assessment involves detailed questioning of the traveller. A checklist or protocol is useful to ensure that all relevant information is obtained and recorded. The traveller should be provided with a personal record of the vaccinations given (patient-retained record) as vaccinations are often administered at different centres. A model checklist, reproducible for individual travellers, is provided.

Medical kit and toilet items

Sufficient medical supplies should be carried to meet all foreseeable needs for the duration of the trip.

A medical kit should be carried for all destinations where there may be significant health risks, particularly those in developing countries, and/or where the local availability of specific medications is not certain. This kit will include basic medicines to treat common ailments, first-aid articles, and any special medical items that may be needed by the individual traveller.

Certain categories of prescription medicine should be carried together with a medical attestation, signed by a physician, certifying that the traveller requires the medication for personal use. Some countries require not only a physician but also the national health administration to sign this certificate.

All medicines should be carried in the hand luggage to minimize any risk of loss during the journey. A duplicate supply carried in the checked luggage is a safety precaution in case of loss or theft.

Toilet items should also be carried in sufficient quantity for the entire visit unless their availability at the travel destination is assured. These will include items for dental care, eye care including contact lenses, skin care and personal hygiene.

Contents of a basic medical kit

First-aid items:

- adhesive tape
- antiseptic wound cleanser
- bandages
- emollient eye drops
- insect repellent
- insect bite treatment
- nasal decongestant
- oral rehydration salts
- scissors and safety pins
- simple analgesic (e.g. paracetamol)
- sterile dressing
- clinical thermometer.

Additional items according to destination and individual needs:

- antidiarrhoeal medication
- antifungal powder
- antimalarial medication
- condoms
- medication for any pre-existing medical condition
- sedatives
- sterile syringes and needles
- water disinfectant
- other items to meet foreseeable needs, according to the destination and duration of the visit.

Travellers with pre-existing medical conditions and special needs

Health risks associated with travel are greater for certain groups of travellers, including infants and young children, pregnant women, the elderly, the disabled, and those who have pre-existing health problems. For all of these travellers, medical advice and special precautions are necessary. They should be well informed about the available medical services at the travel destination.

Age

Infants and young children have special needs with regard to vaccinations and antimalarial precautions (see Chapters 6 and 7). They are particularly sensitive to ultraviolet radiation and become dehydrated more easily than adults in the event of inadequate fluid intake or loss of fluid due to diarrhoea. A child can be overcome by dehydration within a few hours. Air travel may cause discomfort to infants due to changes in cabin air pressure and is contraindicated for infants less than 7 days old. Infants and young children are more sensitive to sudden changes in altitude. They are also more susceptible to many infectious diseases.

Advanced age is not necessarily a contraindication for travel if the general health status is good. Elderly people should seek medical advice before planning long-distance travel.

Pregnancy

Travel is not generally contraindicated during pregnancy until close to the expected date of delivery, provided that the pregnancy is uncomplicated and the woman's health is good. Airlines impose some travel restrictions in late pregnancy and the neonatal period (see Chapter 2).

There are some restrictions on vaccination during pregnancy: specific information is provided in Chapter 6.

Pregnant women risk serious complications if they contract malaria. Travel to malaria-endemic areas should be avoided during pregnancy if at all possible. Specific recommendations for the use of antimalarial drugs during pregnancy are given in Chapter 7.

Medication of any type should be taken during pregnancy only in accordance with medical advice.

Travel to high altitudes (see also Chapter 3) or to remote areas is not advisable during pregnancy.

Disability

Physical disability is not usually a contraindication for travel if the general health status is good. Airlines have regulations on the conditions for travel for disabled passengers who need to be accompanied (see Chapter 2). Information should be obtained from the airline in advance.

Pre-existing illness

People suffering from chronic illnesses should seek medical advice before planning a journey. Conditions that increase health risks during travel include:

- cardiovascular disorders
- chronic hepatitis
- chronic inflammatory bowel diseases
- chronic renal disease requiring dialysis
- chronic respiratory diseases
- diabetes mellitus
- epilepsy
- immunosuppression due to medication or to HIV infection
- previous thromboembolic disease
- severe anaemia
- severe mental disorders
- any chronic condition requiring frequent medical intervention.

Any traveller with a chronic illness should carry all necessary medication for the journey and for the entire duration of the trip in their hand luggage. The name and contact details of their physician should be carried on their person with other travel documents, together with information about the medical condition and treatment, and details of medication (generic drug names included) and prescribed doses. A physician's letter certifying the necessity for any drugs or other medical items (e.g. syringes) carried by the traveller that may be questioned by customs officials should also be carried.

Insurance for travellers

International travellers should be aware that medical care abroad is often available only at private medical facilities and may be costly. In places where good-quality medical care is not readily available, travellers may need to be repatriated in case of accident or illness. If death occurs abroad, repatriation of the body can be extremely expensive and may be difficult to arrange. Travellers should be advised to (1) seek information about possible reciprocal health care agreements between the country of residence and the destination country, and (2) obtain special travellers' health insurance for destinations where health risks are significant and medical care is expensive or not readily available. This health insurance should include coverage for changes to the itinerary, emergency repatriation for health reasons, hospitalization, medical care in case of illness or accident and repatriation of the body in case of death.

Travel agents and tour operators usually provide information about travellers' health insurance. It should be noted that some countries now require proof of adequate health insurance as a condition for entry. Travellers should know the procedures to follow to obtain assistance and reimbursement. A copy of the insurance certificate and contact details should be carried with other travel documents in the hand luggage.

Role of travel industry professionals

Tour operators, travel agents, and airline and shipping companies each have an important responsibility to safeguard the health of travellers. It is in the interests of the travel industry that travellers have the fewest possible problems when travelling to, and visiting, foreign countries. Contact with travellers before the journey provides a unique opportunity to inform and advise them of the situation in each of the countries they are visiting. The travel agent or tour operator should provide the following health-related guidance to travellers:

- Advise the traveller to consult a travel medicine clinic as soon as possible after planning a trip to any destination where significant health risks may be foreseen, particularly those in developing countries, preferably 4–6 weeks before departure.
- Advise last-minute travellers that a visit should be made to a travel medicine clinic, even up to the day before departure.
- Advise travellers if the destination presents any particular hazards to personal safety and security and suggest appropriate precautions.
- Encourage travellers to take out comprehensive travellers' health insurance and provide information on available policies.
- Inform travellers of the procedures for obtaining assistance and reimbursement, particularly if the insurance policy is arranged by the travel agent or company.
- Provide information on:
 - mandatory vaccination requirements for yellow fever;
 - the need for malaria precautions at the travel destination;
 - the existence of other important health hazards at the travel destination;
 - the presence or absence of good-quality medical facilities at the travel destination.

Responsibility of the traveller

Travellers can obtain a great deal of information and advice from medical and travel industry professionals to help prevent health problems while abroad. However, travellers must accept that they are responsible for their health and well-being while travelling and on their return. The following are the main responsibilities to be accepted by the traveller:

- the decision to travel
- recognition and acceptance of any risks involved
- seeking health advice in good time, preferably 4–6 weeks before travel
- compliance with recommended vaccinations and other prescribed medication and health measures
- careful planning before departure
- carrying a medical kit and understanding its use
- obtaining adequate insurance cover
- health precautions before, during, and after the journey
- responsibility for obtaining a physician's letter pertaining to any prescription medicines, syringes, etc. being carried
- responsibility for the health and well-being of accompanying children
- precautions to avoid transmitting any infectious disease to others during and after travel
- careful reporting of any illness on return, including information about all recent travel
- respect for the host country and its population.

A model checklist for use by travellers, indicating steps to be taken before the journey, is provided at the end of the chapter.

Medical examination after travel

Travellers should be advised to have a medical examination on their return if they:

- suffer from a chronic disease, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes mellitus, chronic respiratory disease;
- experience illness in the weeks following their return home, particularly if fever, persistent diarrhoea, vomiting, jaundice, urinary disorders, skin disease or genital infection occurs;
- consider that they have been exposed to a serious infectious disease while travelling;

- have spent more than 3 months in a developing country.

Travellers should provide medical personnel with information on recent travel, including destination, and purpose and duration of visit. Frequent travellers should give details of **all** journeys that have taken place in the preceding weeks and months.

Note. Fever after returning from a malaria-endemic area is a medical emergency and travellers should seek medical attention immediately.

Further reading

Dupont HL, Steffen R, eds. *Textbook of travel medicine and health*. London, BC Decker, 1997.

Zuckerman JN, ed. *Principles and practice of travel medicine*. Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 2001.

Checklist for the traveller

Obtain information on local conditions

Depending on destination

- Risks related to the area (urban or rural)
- Type of accommodation (hotel, camping)
- Length of stay
- Altitude
- Security problems (e.g. conflict)
- Availability of medical facilities

Prevention

Vaccination. Contact the nearest travel medicine centre or a physician as early as possible, preferably 4–6 weeks before departure.

Malaria. Request information on malaria risk, prevention of mosquito bites, possible need for appropriate preventive medication and emergency reserves, and plan for bednet and insect repellent.

Food hygiene. Eat only thoroughly cooked food and drink only well-sealed bottled or packaged cold drinks. Boil drinking-water if safety is doubtful. If boiling is not possible, a certified well-maintained filter and/or disinfectant agent can be used.

Specific local diseases. Please consult the appropriate sections of this volume.

Accidents related to:

- Traffic (obtain a card showing blood group before departure)
- Animals (beware of snakes and rabid dogs)
- Allergies (use a medical alert bracelet)
- Sun (pack sunglasses and sunscreen)

Get the following check-ups

- Medical—obtain prescriptions for medication according to length of stay, and obtain advice from your physician on assembling a suitable medical kit
- Dental
- Ophthalmological—pack spare spectacles
- Other according to specific conditions (e.g. pregnancy, diabetes)

Subscribe to a medical insurance with appropriate cover abroad, i.e. accident, sickness, medical repatriation.

Predeparture medical questionnaire

Surname:	First name:
Date of birth:	Country of origin:
Purpose of travel:	<input type="checkbox"/> Private <input type="checkbox"/> Professional
Special activities:	<input type="checkbox"/> Accommodation: e.g. camping, bivouac <input type="checkbox"/> Sports: e.g. diving, hunting, high-altitude trekking
Date of departure and length of stay:	

Places to be visited

Country	Town	Rural area		Dates	
		Yes	No	From	to
		Yes	No	From	to
		Yes	No	From	to
		Yes	No	From	to
		Yes	No	From	to
		Yes	No	From	to

Medical history: _____

Vaccination record: _____

Current state of health: _____

Chronic illnesses: _____

Recent or current medical treatment: _____

History of jaundice or hepatitis: _____

Allergies (e.g. eggs, antibiotics, sulfonamides): _____

For women: Current pregnancy
 Pregnancy likely within 3 months
 Currently breastfeeding

History of anxiety or depression:
 If yes, treatment prescribed (specify) _____

Neurological disorders (e.g. epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, etc.): _____

Cardiovascular disorders (e.g. thrombosis, use of pacemaker): _____