

GENERAL INFORMATION FOR TRAVELERS HEALTH RISKS WHILE TRAVELING

While traveling, we are exposed to numerous dangerous situations. Our health is threatened by many infectious diseases as well as problems related to poorer hygiene conditions, inadequate drinking water supply, poorer traffic safety, and different climatic and social conditions. Additionally, while traveling we often encounter less developed and less accessible medical services. Health protection while traveling is therefore all the more important and depends primarily on our behaviour and adherence to basic preventive measures.

The most common problems during travel include traveller's diarrhea, upper respiratory tract infections, skin infections, sexually transmitted diseases, diseases transmitted by mosquitoes and other insects, animal bites and stings, injuries, altitude sickness, motion sickness, fatigue due to time zone differences (jet lag), sunburn, and many others.

Traveller's diarrhea is the most common health problem, occurring during the trip itself or shortly after returning home. The illness is a consequence of infection with various microorganisms or poisoning by their metabolic products. We become infected through food and drink, or disease-causing agents are introduced into the body via contaminated hands. The diarrhea is usually mild and resolves on its own within a few days; if accompanied by elevated body temperature or if blood is present in the stool, medical attention is required. Traveller's diarrhea can be particularly dangerous for infants and young children, pregnant women, elderly individuals, and patients with reduced immunity, in whom the illness can lead to dangerous dehydration. In the case of traveller's diarrhea, ensure adequate replacement of lost fluids and electrolytes. The most appropriate approach is the use of ready-made rehydration powders and solutions, though oral rehydration fluid can also be prepared at home. Mix 4 teaspoons of sugar and half a teaspoon of salt into a litre of boiled water, and add orange juice. In more severe cases, medications that reduce intestinal motility and certain antibiotics can also be used for treating traveller's diarrhea.

The risk of developing traveller's diarrhea is reduced by following general hygiene measures and carefully selecting food and beverages. The safest option is consuming freshly prepared and thoroughly cooked food. Dry foods (crackers, bread) and fruit that can be peeled with a clean knife and clean hands are also safe. Follow the rule: "Cook it, boil it, peel it, or don't eat it!" Foods that have not been heat-treated pose a significant danger, e.g., desserts, sauces, toppings, cold cuts, salads, raw vegetables, egg dishes, ice cream, and seafood. Milk and dairy products are also considered risky foods. When traveling in areas where reliable tap water is not available, always consume bottled water and bottled beverages. Coffee and tea are also safe, as they are prepared from boiled water. If you boil water, it must boil for at least 1 minute, and at higher altitudes for at least 3 minutes. Avoid drinking beverages with ice, which may be made from unsafe water, or fruit juices diluted with water.

Maintaining proper hand hygiene is extremely important. Wash hands as frequently and thoroughly as possible with soap and clean water, and definitely before meals and after each use of the toilet. If clean water is not available, the use of moist hygiene wipes or alcohol-based wipes is recommended.

Motion Sickness and Insect-Borne Diseases

A common problem associated with travel is motion sickness, which is a consequence of a mismatch between actual and perceived body movements. Motion sickness is accompanied by facial pallor, cold sweats, and possibly vomiting. By reducing head movement and limiting visual stimuli, we can try to prevent or alleviate the problem (closing the eyes, focusing the gaze on the horizon). The problem can also be prevented with motion sickness medications, which should be taken 1 hour before exposure to the mode of transport.

Diseases transmitted by mosquitoes and other insects are numerous and common. Travelers may contract malaria, dengue, yellow fever, Japanese encephalitis, chikungunya, and other vector-borne diseases. Different insects are active at different times of day, with most being active in the morning and evening hours. We can protect ourselves against some vector-borne diseases through preventive vaccination (yellow fever, Japanese encephalitis, dengue, chikungunya) or preventive medication (malaria), but we must always protect ourselves well against insect bites. We protect ourselves by wearing clothing that covers most of the skin, using insecticides to eliminate insects in enclosed spaces, preventing insects from entering living spaces with protective screens, sleeping under bed nets, and it is also very important to use mosquito sprays (repellents). Apply repellents to exposed areas of skin, and also to clothing, and reapply every few hours. Be careful not to get them in the mouth, eyes, or on wounds. Repellents can be safely used by pregnant women and small children. We recommend using repellents containing 30–50% DEET or 20% picaridin.

The causative agents of some tropical diseases are also transmitted to humans through standing water, so swimming in lakes and slow-moving rivers is not recommended in endemic areas. When walking on sandy beaches, the use of sandals is advised.

The risk of injuries and traffic accidents is reduced by avoiding night driving, using seat belts and protective helmets. Special attention should be paid to the safe use of swimming pools and the hazards of swimming in the sea due to currents and waves.

While traveling, it is also necessary to ensure adequate protection against sexually transmitted infections.

Do not forget proper sun protection with a high SPF factor (30 and above), and ensure a daily intake of sufficient fluids (a minimum of 2 liters of water per day; for every 10°C increase in external temperature, an additional 1 liter).

Rabies and Animal Bites

In the case of a scratch or bite by an animal (dogs, cats, monkeys, other mammals, and bats), there is a risk of transmission of the deadly rabies virus. The risk exists in most parts of the world, especially in Asia, Africa and some Eastern-European countries. The risk in bats exists everywhere in the world. In the event of a bite, the wound should be washed immediately with soap and then rinsed under clean running water for at least 15 minutes. After washing, apply wound iodine (e.g., in the form of povidone-iodine) to the wound, cover it with sterile gauze, and bandage it. As soon as possible, and no later than 24 hours after the bite or scratch, it is mandatory to visit a healthcare facility, where they will decide on possible protection through vaccination, which consists of a number of doses and usually needs to be continued at home. After returning to Slovenia, a visit to the antirabies clinic at the regional unit of the National Institute of Public Health is recommended. Preventive vaccination is recommended for travellers who, due to their activities during travel, have a higher likelihood of bites and rabies infection.

More information about travel risks, individual diseases, and preventive measures is available on the website of the Section for Preventive Medicine of the Slovenian Medical Association "Zdravi na pot in nazaj" and other websites in English (CDC, Travel Health Pro).

Travel First Aid Kit

A travel first aid kit is an essential part of every traveller's luggage. The contents of the kit should be adapted to the individual's personal needs and health condition. It is also advisable to arrange additional health insurance for travel abroad.

Basic contents:

- Health insurance card or document
- Appropriate certificate of health insurance and vaccination (if required)
- Rehydration powder for preparing rehydration solution (for replacing minerals and preventing dehydration during diarrhea or vomiting)
- Probiotic tablets or capsules for relieving diarrhea
- Laxatives for relieving constipation
- Tablets for fever and pain (in areas where infection with any of the haemorrhagic fevers is possible, preparations based on acetylsalicylic acid are discouraged)
- Thermometer for measuring body temperature
- Adhesive bandages, bandages, gauze, sterile wound dressing, elastic bandage, scissors
- Disinfectant (alcohol or disinfectant wipes)
- Repellent and insect bite protection products
- Sunscreen and other sun protection items

Supplemental contents should be adapted to the individual, destination, and mode of travel, so each person assembles it according to their own needs:

- Medications prescribed or recommended by a personal physician that you take regularly
- Malaria prophylaxis tablets (antimalarials), if traveling to an area with a high risk of malaria
- Motion sickness tablets
- Allergy medication (antihistamines) for individuals with allergies
- Water conditioning agents or means of preparing safe drinking water (water boiler, water purification tablets, etc.) for situations where safe bottled water is not available

What to consider if taking prescribed medications?

First, consult your physician about whether the planned trip is appropriate for you. If you are using medications that need to be declared to customs at your destination, or if you are a diabetic and carry needles and syringes, ask your treating physician for a written certificate (in an international language), otherwise complications may arise.

Where should we store medications brought on a trip?

Store medications in one place, preferably in a thermally insulated bag and safely out of reach of children. Pay attention to special transport conditions at airports or border crossings. Before preparing your medication bag, check the expiration dates. Medications should remain in their original packaging, together with the instructions for use. If possible, they should be stored at a temperature no higher than room temperature (25 °C). Also pay attention to the storage of medications that require special storage conditions. They should be protected from light and moisture.