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Health Risks and Precautions for International Travelers

General Considerations

The number of (World Tourism Organization) traveling internationally increases every year.

International tourist arrivals in the year 2019 reached 1 billion, with arrivals expected to reach 1.6 billion by 2029. Over half the arrivals were for leisure and holidays, with business, religious pilgrimages, and family visits cited as other major reasons people travel.

International travel can pose serious health risks to travelers, depending on the destination country, the nature and characteristics of the trip, and the traveler's physical condition and overall health. Travelers might be exposed to sudden and significant changes in altitude, humidity, microbes, and temperature. Also, serious health risks can arise in areas where clean water is unavailable, sanitation and hygiene are inadequate, and medical services are not well-developed.

All people planning travel should know the potential hazards of the countries they are traveling to and learn how to minimize their risk of acquiring diseases. Forward planning, preventive measures, and careful precautions can substantially reduce the risks of adverse health consequences (World Health Organization).

The medical profession and the travel industry are an important source (Johnson 50) of help and advice for travelers, however, it is the responsibility of the traveler to seek out information on travel-related risks, understand the factors involved, and take the necessary precautions.

Travel-related Risks

The following are key factors in determining the risks to which travelers may be exposed:

- destination and mode of transportation
- purpose, duration, and season of travel
- standards of accommodation and food hygiene
- behavior and health of the traveler¹

Destinations where accommodation, hygiene, sanitation, medical care, and water quality are of a high standard pose relatively few serious risks for the health of travelers, unless there is a pre-existing illness. This also applies to travelers visiting most major cities and tourist centers and staying in quality accommodations, such as a conference center or a resort.

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 travelers. Exposure to insects, infectious agents, and contaminated food and water, makes travel in many remote regions particularly hazardous. Travelers who venture into remote areas should take stringent precautions to avoid illness, including receiving vaccinations and taking antimalarial medications.

The purpose, season, and duration of the visit, the mode of transportation, and the lifestyle and overall health of the traveler are also important in determining the likelihood of exposure to infectious agents.

Medical Consultation Before Travel

Travelers intending to visit a destination in a developing country should consult a travel medicine clinic or a physician at least 4-8 weeks before the journey, and preferably earlier for long-term travel or travel to remote areas. Last minute travelers should also consult a clinic or physician.

¹ Behavior is a critical factor. For example, going outdoors in a malaria-endemic area could

A medical consultation is needed to determine the need for vaccinations and antimalarial medication, as well as any other medication the traveler may require. Medical advisors base their recommendations on an assessment of risk for the individual traveler as well as any associated public² health.

Malaria: A Serious Health Risk for Travelers

Each year an estimated 8 million North Americans travel to countries where malaria is common. Transmitted by the bite of an infected mosquito, malaria is a serious and potentially fatal infectious disease that is characterized by headaches, fever, chills, and sweating.

Malaria occurs mostly in poor tropical and subtropical areas of the world. In many of the countries affected by malaria, it is a leading cause of illness and death. In areas with high transmission, the most vulnerable groups are young children, who have not developed immunity to malaria yet, and (Clinton 92)t women, whose immunity has been decreased by pregnancy.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, malaria can usually be prevented if travelers to tropical and subtropical regions follow these preventive steps:

First, inform yourself about the risk of acquiring malaria in the region of the world where you plan to travel. Malaria exists throughout the tropics, but it is most prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Malaria hotspots change constantly, so check with a travel medicine specialist or the Centers for Disease Control for the latest developments before you travel.

Second, take measures to prevent mosquito bites, particularly between dusk and dawn. Always sleep in a well-screened room, preferably under a mosquito net that has been treated with insecticide. During the evening, wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts, and apply an insect repellent that contains DEET.

Finally, consult your physician or a travel medicine specialist several weeks prior to departure for advice on taking antimalarial drugs. Prophylaxis drugs need to be taken continuously, beginning before travel commences and continuing through up to four weeks after leaving malaria-endemic areas.

Even if you take antimalarial pills, it is still possible to get malaria, so seek medical treatment promptly if you experience flu-like symptoms and are in or have recently visited an area where malaria is present.

² It is best to consult a travel medicine

For more information on malaria prevention and other travel health issues, check out the Centers for Disease Control on the Internet at www.cdc.gov/travel.

Malaria Worldwide

- 3.3 billion people (World Tourism Organization 15)(half the world's population) live in areas at risk for malaria transmission.
- 35 countries (30 in sub-Saharan Africa and 5 in Asia) account for 98% of global malaria deaths.
- The World Health Organization estimates that in 2018, malaria caused 350-500 million clinical episodes of malaria.
- An estimated 863,000 malaria deaths occur every year, most of them children.
- 89% of malaria deaths occur in Africa.
- Malaria is the fifth cause of death from infectious diseases worldwide (after respiratory infections, HIV/AIDS, diarrheal diseases, and tuberculosis).
- Malaria is the second leading cause of death from infectious diseases in Africa, after HIV/AIDS.

Source:

Medical Kit and Personal Items

Travelers should always carry a medical kit, particularly to destinations where there may be significant health risks, including developing countries where local availability of medications cannot be guaranteed.

The medical kit should include basic medicines to treat common ailments, first aid items, and any other special items, such as syringes and needles, that might be needed for a pre-existing medical condition. It is also important to bring a signed statement from a physician certifying that the traveler requires specific medication or items for a medical condition.

Travelers should also carry personal items in sufficient quantity for the length of the visit, unless their availability is assured at the travel destination. Such items might include toothpaste, supplies and solutions for contact lenses, skin care items, and other items for personal hygiene.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends travelers carry the following items for a basic medical kit:

First aid items

- Adhesive bandages, multiple sizes
- Adhesive tape
- Antibacterial hand wipes or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol
- Antifungal and antibacterial ointments
- Antihistamine
- Anti-itch cream for insect bites and stings
- Antiseptic wound cleanser
- Cotton swabs
- Digital thermometer
- Disposable gloves
- Elastic bandage wrap for sprains and strains
- First aid quick reference card
- Insect repellent
- Medication for pain or fever, such as Acetaminophen, Aspirin, or Ibuprofen
- Moleskin for blisters
- Oral rehydration salts
- Saline eye drops
- Scissors, safety pins, and tweezers³
- Sterile dressing

Other important items

The following items might be necessary depending on the destination, trip duration, and individual needs:

- Antibiotic for self-treatment of diarrhea
- Antidiarrheal medication
- Antifungal powder

³ Pack these items in checked

- Antimalarial medication
- Anti-motion sickness medication
- Epinephrine auto-injector (such as an EpiPen) for severe allergic reactions
- Extra pair of contacts or prescription glasses
- Medication for high-altitude sickness
- Medications taken on a regular basis at home
- Mild laxative
- Mild sleep aid or anti-anxiety medication
- Sterile syringes and needles
- Sunscreen⁴
- Water purification tablets

Contact card

Travelers should carry the name and contact details for their physician, together with information about any medical conditions, treatments, and medications, including generic drug names and doses. The contact card should also include contact information for a family member still in the traveler's home country and the home embassy or consulate in the destination country.

Insurance for Travelers

International travelers should be aware that medical care abroad is often only available at private medical facilities and can be extremely expensive. In places where high-quality medical care is not readily available, travelers might need to be repatriated in the event of an accident or illness. Repatriation of the body can be costly and difficult to arrange if death occurs abroad.

Travelers are advised to seek information about possible reciprocal health-care agreements between the country of residence and the destination country, and to obtain special traveler's health insurance for destinations where health risks are significant and medical care is expensive and not readily available.

⁴ SPF 15 or greater (Placeholder1)

Travel health insurance should include coverage for changes to the itinerary, emergency repatriation for health reasons, medical care in case of illness or accident, hospitalization, and repatriation of the body in case of death.

Some countries now require proof of adequate health insurance as a condition of entry. Travelers should be familiar with the procedures to obtain medical assistance if needed while abroad, and should carry a copy of the insurance certificate, along with other important travel documents, in their carry-on luggage.

Traveler's Checklist

When preparing for an international trip, travelers can use the following checklist as a guide:

Determine local conditions

Risks related to the destination (urban, rural, or remote)

Type of accommodation (resort, local hotel, or camping)

Length of stay

Altitude

Regional conflicts

Standards of hygiene and sanitation

Availability and quality of medical facilities

Arrange a medical consultation

Visit a physician or travel clinic 4-8 weeks prior to departure

Receive required and recommended vaccinations

Determine malaria risk and plan for prevention of mosquito bites; obtain antimalarial drugs, mosquito net, and insect repellent

Establish a plan for food hygiene

Eat only thoroughly cooked food and drink only bottled water or packaged drinks

Boil, filter, or disinfect water if bottled water will not be available

Assemble a suitable medical kit

Include items for basic first aid and items specific to the destination and the traveler's personal needs

Obtain prescription medications

Subscribe to travel medical insurance

Look for insurance that covers changes in itinerary, medical care, hospitalization, as well as repatriation.

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