



This article was produced in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada.

TRAVEL HEALTH

The Issue

As global travel has increased in recent years, so has the possibility of importing into Canada existing and new diseases. All Canadians have a responsibility to protect their own health while abroad and to contact their doctor, reporting where they have been, should they become ill on their return to Canada.

Background

Canadians make more than 100 million trips abroad each year, for business and pleasure. While the vast majority of them come home safe and healthy, a number do become ill. Often the illnesses and injuries are caused by:

- Not being protected against diseases for which there are vaccines
- Consuming contaminated water or food
- Not taking preventative medications, such as malaria pills
- Taking risks, such as being tattooed, having unsafe sex or drinking excessively.

Recent outbreaks of new diseases, such as SARS in Canada in 2003, show that deadly diseases against which people have little or no immunity can spread quickly.

It is up to individuals and governments to be on guard against diseases that can affect the health of everyone, both here and abroad. It is recommended that Canadians travelling internationally contact their doctor or a travel clinic six to

eight weeks before travelling, regardless of where they are going, to have their risk assessed. Based on your current health, your travel itinerary and your previous immunization history, your doctor can determine what immunizations and/or preventive medication you may need, as well as advise you on how you can avoid disease risks.

A variety of conditions in other countries can be significantly different from those in Canada. Anyone travelling abroad should be aware that such conditions might affect your health, your access to medical help, and your personal safety.

The Health Risks of Travel

By far the most common complaint while travelling is diarrhea, or 'turista'. This is usually caused by the differences in water purity. Canada's municipal water supplies are treated to remove most waterborne organisms, but some less developed countries may not do this. Travellers may have diarrhea while travelling abroad if they drink the local water or food prepared with local water in these countries.

You can also be at risk for a number of childhood illnesses when you travel, especially if you have not been immunized against them or kept your immunizations up to date. Routine immunizations include:

- Diphtheria
- Tetanus
- Polio



- Measles
- Mumps
- Rubella

In countries where sanitary conditions are poor, immunizations against typhoid and hepatitis A may be recommended. Depending on your travel activities and the local disease situation, you may need to be immunized against these diseases.

- Meningitis
- Japanese encephalitis
- European tick-borne encephalitis
- Hepatitis B
- Rabies

Depending on where you are travelling, you may also be at risk of these diseases, among others.

- Malaria, caused by infected mosquito bites in many tropical countries
- Yellow fever, caused by infected mosquito bites in Central Africa and South America
- Dengue fever, caused by infected mosquito bites in many tropical countries
- Schistosomiasis, caused by a parasite in fresh water in the Caribbean, South America, Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

As well, some sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, are more common in some countries than they are in Canada.

You should also be safety conscious when travelling. Economic conditions in developing countries can cause increased crime rates and tourists are often targeted.

Minimizing Your Risk

Here are some tips to help you enjoy safe travel.

- Make sure all your regular vaccinations are up to date.
- Before you travel, contact a travel clinic or your doctor six to eight weeks before you go, to allow time for any vaccinations you may need. This is especially true if you are going to tropical areas or developing countries.
- Arrange for private health insurance while you are away, as your provincial/territorial health insurance may not cover you. Your travel agent can advise you on this.
- If you are going to an area where malaria is present, it is important that you take antimalarial medication as prescribed by your doctor.
- Since anti-malarial medication does not guarantee absolute protection against the disease, preventing mosquito bites is very important. Use mosquito repellents when outside, especially between dusk and dawn. Sleep in well-screened or air conditioned accommodation or use a bed net. Wear trousers and long sleeves at dusk.
- If you become ill in the first two months to a year after you return, see your doctor immediately and tell her/him that you have visited an area where malaria occurs.
- To prevent 'turista', the key principles to remember are: boil it, cook it, peel it or leave

it! Always drink purified water or commercially bottled beverages, and pasteurized milk. Avoid ice, salads, re-heated foods, uncooked shellfish, fruit that is not peeled and food from street vendors.

- Wash your hands often with soap or a sanitizing agent when travelling, especially before eating or drinking.
- Should you experience diarrhea, be sure to drink plenty of liquids to prevent becoming dehydrated, especially in warm climates.
- In warmer climates, always use a sunblock with a minimum SPF of 15.
- To help prevent sexually transmitted diseases, always use a condom if you have sex with someone you meet while travelling.
- Never share needles to inject intravenous drugs with anyone.
- Swim in fresh water only if you know it is free of biharzia, the parasites that cause schistosomiasis.
- Do not walk alone in remote areas, back streets or beaches, where you may be at risk of a personal attack or bag snatching. Valuables should be left at home or deposited in hotel safes. Travellers cheques, cash, passports and tickets should not be carried in bags that can be snatched. It is recommended that you use a body belt.
- Do not ride in over-crowded vehicles or on motorcycles, especially at night outside of urban areas.



- If you need medication for an existing medical condition, take enough with you to last during your travel. Make sure the containers are clearly marked and carry a copy of the doctor's prescription with you. Essential medication should be carried in two different pieces of luggage, in case one should get lost or stolen.
- If your medication requires sterile syringes or needles, carry a doctor's explanation or medical certificate with you. In many countries where drug trafficking is a problem, a traveller found with syringes and without adequate explanation, could be in serious trouble with the police.

The Public Health Agency of Canada's Role

The Public Health Agency of Canada's Travel Medicine Program is a front-line service provider for the travelling Canadian public and health care providers. To encourage safe and healthy travel, the Public Health Agency of Canada provides travellers and health care professionals with information on current international disease outbreaks of concern, as well as recommendations to prevent specific diseases and treatment guidelines.

Need More Info?

For more information on travel health :

Visit the Travel Medicine Program website at:
www.travelhealth.gc.ca
or Contact the Travel Medicine Program at (613)- 957-8739

Canadian Health Portal, Travel Web site at:
http://chp-pcs.gc.ca/CHP/index_e.jsp/pageid/4005/odp/Top/Health/Travel

World Health Organization's International travel and health Web site at:
<http://www.who.int/ith/en/>

Foreign Affairs Canada, Travel Assistance Web site at:
<http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/travel/menu-en.asp>

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www.healthcanada.ca/iyh
You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709
or TTY at 1-800-267-1245*