

Your guide to safe international travel

2 Personal health

Travelling abroad exposes you to health risks you may not come across at home. Following the tips in these checklists will help you avoid them through good preparation and prompt action if you have problems while abroad.

2a Vaccinations and diseases

You can prevent most diseases you're likely to come across by getting vaccinations in your home country – see checklist 1c. But you need to be careful once you've arrived, too – especially to avoid getting malaria or rabies.

Malaria

Malaria is a major health problem in developing countries with tropical and sub-tropical climates. It affects around 300 million people a year and is one of the world's most significant causes of death. It's caused by a parasite that enters the bloodstream when the victim is bitten by an infected mosquito. The symptoms are fever alternating with chills and shivers, often similar to flu-type illnesses. There is no vaccination and no cure. Protection comes in two forms: preventing the mosquitoes biting by using insect repellents and mosquito nets, and killing the parasite by taking anti-malarial drugs.

Malaria prevention checklist

- Cover exposed skin, particularly after dark
- Use insect repellents and follow the manufacturer's instructions on how often to apply them
- Use mosquito nets over beds, and screen windows and doors
- Burn anti-mosquito coils or wear repellent arm or head bands
- Spray rooms with insecticides before sleeping
- Sleep in an air-conditioned room
- Don't take siestas outside except under a net
- Take anti-malarial drugs exactly as stated on the prescription. Complete the course to make sure the parasite doesn't develop (some cases of malaria occur when travellers stop taking the drugs too soon when they come home)
- Treat any flu-like symptoms or fever within three months of your return as suspicious and ask your doctor about them

Rabies

Rabies is a viral infection usually transmitted by an animal's saliva entering the body through a bite or graze. Once the symptoms appear, it's invariably fatal. The best way to protect yourself is to avoid contact with animals, since rabies is endemic in most countries.

There's a vaccine, but it can have unpleasant side effects. Getting vaccinated before you travel is recommended only if you're going to a high-risk area.

If you're bitten by any animal, get help immediately – you need to have the vaccine as soon as possible.

2b Food and drink

Many infectious diseases (eg cholera, hepatitis A, B and E, listeriosis and typhoid fever) are transmitted by contaminated food and water. The local standard of safety depends on how food and drink are prepared and handled. Some simple precautions can reduce the risk significantly:

- eat only food that's been thoroughly cooked and is still hot
- avoid cooked food kept at room temperature for several hours
- avoid food bought from street vendors
- avoid uncooked food, apart from fruit and vegetables that can be peeled or shelled
- boil water for drinking or brushing teeth if you're unsure of its safety. If you can't boil it, use a disinfectant tablet or a certified and well-maintained filter, or stick to bottled water
- avoid ice unless you know it's made from treated and chlorinated water
- cold bottled and packaged drinks are usually safe, as long as they're sealed. Hot drinks are also usually safe.

2c Illness abroad

- If you're ill abroad, it's important to tell someone locally about it, even if it doesn't seem too serious. If your condition suddenly gets worse, you may be unable to find help
- If you take drugs that you've bought locally, make sure you double-check the translation of usage and dosage instructions

2d Toiletries and medical provisions

- If you're on a short trip, take enough toiletries to last the stay
- If you wear glasses or contact lenses, consider taking spare pairs, packed separately
- If you're taking prescription drugs with you, make sure you have enough for your trip and take a note signed by your doctor saying what they're for – they may not be available or recognised locally
- Take a first aid kit for minor cuts and bruises
- If you're visiting somewhere with poor medical care standards, it's a good idea to take a medical kit with basic sterile equipment (syringes, sutures and dressings)

2e DVT and air travel

There's some evidence to suggest that sitting still with little or no exercise on long flights may increase the risk of deep-vein thrombosis (DVT). If you're overweight or take the contraceptive pill or hormone replacement therapy, you may also be at greater risk from DVT. You can reduce the risk by:

- exercising your feet, ankles and lower leg muscles regularly during the flight
- wearing compression stockings
- getting up and walking around, if it's safe
- drinking plenty of water.