

Preparing for International Travel and Global Medical Care



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KEYWORDS

- Travel • Immunization • Vaccination • Malaria prophylaxis • Preparation
- Travel medical kits

KEY POINTS

- Although more people are traveling, few seek pretravel consultation to mitigate avoidable health risks associated with traveling.
- A comprehensive pretravel medical consultation should include an individualized risk assessment, immunization review, and discussion of arthropod protective measures, malaria prophylaxis, traveler's diarrhea, and injury prevention.
- Travel with children and jet lag reduction require additional planning and prevention strategies.
- Travel and evacuation insurance is recommended when traveling to less resourced countries.
- Consideration should also be given to other high-risk travel scenarios, including the provision of health care overseas, adventure and extreme sports, water environments and diving, high altitude, and terrorism/unstable political situations.

INTRODUCTION

During the first 9 months of 2016, nearly 1 billion tourists had already traveled around the world, a 4% increase from the prior year.¹ The World Travel & Tourism Council projects that this number will increase to nearly 1.8 billion international travelers in 2025. Depending on their destination, approximately 22% to 64% of these travelers will experience some illness, most commonly diarrhea, respiratory infections, and skin conditions.² Some travelers may even develop life-threatening conditions (eg, malaria), which could have been avoided with proper pretravel preparation.

Disclosure: The authors have nothing to disclose.

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Emerg Med Clin N Am 35 (2017) 465–484
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.emc.2017.01.006>

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On a typical 2-week trip, travelers lose an average of 3 days because of illness, with nearly 20% remaining ill after their return home and 10% seeking medical care for their illnesses.³

For every 100,000 travelers visiting a developing country for 1 month⁴:

- 50,000 develop some health problem while abroad
- 8000 need to see a physician
- 5000 are confined to a bed
- 300 are admitted to a hospital
- 50 require air evacuation
- 1 dies

With prevention of these potential hazards in mind, this article explores the key elements of preparation for travel and global medical care.

PRETRAVEL CONSULTATION

Many travelers are unaware or unconcerned about the health and safety risks posed by travel, and few seek proper pretravel counseling.^{5–9} Travelers visiting friends and relatives are at especially high risk for illness (specifically, malaria and food-borne illnesses); they tend to have a false sense of immunity, visit higher risk destinations, stay abroad longer, eat local food, and do not seek pretravel advice or use protective measures.^{10–13} There is a known association between failing to seek pretravel consultation and the development of illnesses like malaria, which can have significant health and economic consequences.¹³ The average health care payer cost to prevent malaria is \$162, whereas the cost of treating an adult with malaria is \$25,250 (with an additional 6–24 work days lost).¹⁴

A comprehensive pretravel medical consultation should include an individualized risk assessment; a review of immunizations; and a discussion of arthropod protective measures, malaria prophylaxis, traveler's diarrhea (TD), and other travel-related education and risk reduction practices. This approach is particularly important for travelers who are headed to developing countries; planning adventure travel; planning an extended trip; immune compromised or with chronic medical conditions; children; and pregnant or planning pregnancy.² Although consulting a specialist is advisable at any time before travel, a pretravel checkup should ideally occur at least six weeks in advance of the intended departure date to maximize the effect of immunizations and other preventive measures (eg, malaria chemoprophylaxis needs to be started in advance of travel).

INDIVIDUALIZED RISK ASSESSMENT

A traveler's individual risk of travel depends on several factors: medical history, itinerary (regions, season, dates), prior travel experience, activities (eg, adventure, mass gathering), accommodations, risk tolerance, and financial means. A traveler's medical history should also include current medications, disabilities, immune status, immunizations, surgeries, allergies, and pregnancy/breastfeeding status.

PRETRAVEL IMMUNIZATIONS

All travelers should be screened to determine their need for pretravel immunizations including a review of their current immunization history. In addition to routine or domestic vaccinations, additional destination-specific vaccinations may be required depending on the traveler's itinerary, anticipated activities, and duration of stay. Because of the associated health risks, pregnant women and immunocompromised

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