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STOP PRESS

Do you need that shot?

Read on before you go to the travel clinic

By Nichole Bernier *Reporting on a nationwide survey*

AT THEIR BEST, TRAVEL CLINICS HELP travelers stay healthy overseas at a fair price. But they can also turn out to be an expensive hassle that leaves you inadequately informed and, possibly, sick.

Say a trip to East Africa is in the works. A visit to a travel clinic for the appropriate vaccines could cost \$200. Or it could run \$450 or more.

Armed with an African itinerary, we called more than 70 clinics around the country and visited 9 of them. Some

were affiliated with hospitals and some with university medical centers; others were located in airports or private offices. We posed the same question at each clinic: What vaccinations do we need for a three-week trip to rural, coastal, and urban areas of

Kenya and Tanzania?

Some patterns emerged. Most travel clinics recommend the correct vaccinations. But prices vary wildly, and they don't necessarily reflect the quality of care.

Many clinics were unwilling to provide help, with some refusing more gracefully than others. Of all the calls that we made, only 40 resulted in our speaking to a human being (no dead-end transfers, answering machines, or frustrating termi-

nal holds).

Twenty-three of the 40 clinics declined to help our Africa-bound traveler over the phone. Eight recommended contacting the Centers for Disease Control, but two didn't know the number. One Florida clinic suggested calling the department of health in Clearwater. When we did, they mentioned only two of the eight recommended vaccinations.

Clinic staffers offered a va-

This might hurt: Some clinics charge steep prices for office visits.

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riety of reasons for refusing to supply answers. Some said that personal consultations were necessary, others that only doctors were qualified to dispense medical information. Several clinics just didn't want to offer free advice. "We're too busy to give information over the phone," replied a staffer at Honolulu's Travel Medicine Clinic. Or, more bluntly put (by someone at the Mount Auburn Hospital clinic in Cambridge, Massachusetts): "We're not reimbursed for that."

Understandably, a clinic is not a free hot line, but good service breeds more business. "I think that's extremely bad service and practice," said *Condé Nast Traveler* medical adviser Dr. Richard Dawood. "Most places do a better job of disguising that they're after your money."

Sixteen clinics, however, did take stabs at recommending precautions for Kenya and Tanzania, though they didn't all give the right advice. Five added ineffective cholera shots to the list of suggested vaccines; two neglected to mention meningitis and rabies, which are gener-

ally recommended.

To be fair, we might have gotten more thorough advice had we gone in for a consultation instead of phoning. So in nine cases we did.

The clinics we road-tested performed fairly well across the board. A typical visit involved about 15 minutes with a doctor or registered nurse and a prescription for malaria tablets. All clinics asked about medical history, general health, and the travel itinerary.

Physicians waxed poetic about permethrin-soaked mosquito nets, insect repellents with adequate percentages of deet, and the treatment of diarrhea. Most clinics provided reams of printed material and ticked off the hazards of traveling to East Africa: Don't drink unboiled water or eat improperly prepared food; don't swim in freshwater; don't pet the animals; treat mosquitoes as if they were plague-carrying rodents; and regard unprotected sex and blood transfusions as potentially life-threatening.

The cost of the visit didn't

necessarily correspond to the time spent in consultation: \$60 bought one hour at the University of Virginia Medical Center, while \$100 procured only half that time at UCLA. But both visits were quality time compared with the hasty five minutes \$20 got us at the Daniel Freeman

A double dose of cholera vaccine is not twice as effective; it's twice as costly

LAX Medical Group in Los Angeles.

Consultation fees ranged from \$18 to \$125; a few clinics waive their fees if travelers begin shots the same day. The cost of a consultation does not usually include immunizations, but some clinics throw in a free gamma globulin or tetanus shot.

Beyond this, immunization costs are all over the map. Tetanus boosters cost \$5 at one clinic, \$25 at another; yellow fever runs \$20 to \$60; typhoid goes for between \$20 and \$50. Hepatitis

A (gamma globulin) ranges from \$15 to \$55 for a three-week stay in Africa. Meningitis costs as little as \$40 at Boston airport's East Boston Logan Health Associates, or as much as a cool \$90 at Long Island Jewish Medical Center's Travel Immunization Center.

Given these costs, it is especially disturbing when a clinic suggests superfluous vaccines like cholera, which experts agree is less than 50 percent effective. One clinic we visited even recommended a double dose for added

protection. But in the case of cholera, two halves don't make a whole—they just make an unreliable vaccine twice as expensive.

Our visits also revealed some gems. Dr. Richard Guerrant at the University of Virginia spent an hour with our reporter, who found him "genuinely concerned and informed." Dr. Bradley Connor of New York's Travel Health Services offered bountiful tips on insect repellents and portable medical kits, as well as 25 minutes of personal attention, all for a reasonable \$35 fee.

Dr. Caroline MacLeod of Miami's Tropical Medicine & Traveler's Clinic showed our reporter a 30-minute video on travel precautions.

We were less impressed with the Freeman clinic in Los Angeles, which neglected to mention insect precautions, diarrhea prevention and treatment, and risks associated with rabies and freshwater swimming. We were also disappointed with Logan Health Associates in Boston: To obtain a prescription for malaria, we would have had to schedule an additional \$35 visit with the doctor, on top of the \$42 we'd already paid for ten minutes with a registered nurse.

"It's a bit of a rip-off," said Dr. Dawood. "It's ridiculous to have the patient make two visits instead of one."

Unfortunately, there is no easy way to tell the good clinics from the bad. First, find out whether the clinic specializes in travel medicine or just offers vaccines on the side. Ferret out in advance what is included in the consultation fee: It may sound steep but cover a few vaccinations as well. Ask for preliminary information and prices over the phone and see how helpful the employees are. After all, it's your nickel. □

Travel clinics: A sampling

CLINIC	CONSULTATION FEE*	ADDED VALUE
Mt. Auburn Hospital Travel Clinic, Cambridge	\$26-\$40**	Charge waived if vaccines begin same day
Traveler's Clinic, University of Arizona, Tucson	\$37	
Traveler's Clinic, Miriam Hospital, Providence	\$50	Includes tetanus and gamma globulin
New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, N.Y.C.	\$75	Maximum charge \$275, regardless of shots needed
Tropical Medicine & Traveler's Clinic, Miami	\$85	Includes 30-minute video
Travel and Tropical Medicine Specialty Office, UCLA, Los Angeles	\$100	
Tropical Medicine and International Travelers Clinic, Yale University, New Haven	\$125	Includes tetanus, gamma globulin, measles, and polio

* Includes prescriptions and printed information at most clinics.
 ** Depends on length of appointment, itinerary, and traveler's medical needs.

TICKER TAPE: People taken in for questioning after joking about carrying weapons at the Durango, Colo., airport last summer: 6.