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# What to take—plus a guide to shots and insurance



The key to smart travel is to pack neither heavy nor light, but right. Jeff, my traveling companion on a recent rafting trip on the Mekong River in Thailand, took too much, while I took too little. His medical kit alone was almost enough to sink the raft, but at the end of the trip we had used scarcely anything in it. My sole contribution to our medical artillery—a bottle of Pepto-Bismol—was almost empty before we'd gotten started.

Planning your medical kit carefully will help you cope with illness, injury and medical emergencies and reduce the risk of a spoiled vacation. In many countries, you can't expect to find even the most familiar over-the-counter medicines.

A travel medical kit should be simple. Exotic and high-tech remedies aren't usually necessary, but when you're halfway down the Mekong or

even basking in the Bahamas, you can't walk across the street to your neighborhood store for a bottle of aspirin, acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Pain—from headaches and minor injuries to sunburn and insect bites—is one of the most common symptoms travelers experience. Best to be prepared.

If you like to experiment with native cuisine—jellyfish salad in Burma, for example, or iguana stew in Guatemala—you'll appreciate the Pepto-Bismol. It contains bismuth subsalicylate, a mild antibacterial agent, and can be used to treat cramps and diarrhea. (Note: Adult medications should not be used for children.) Imodium, which can now be bought without a prescription, is another alternative for diarrhea, as well as the prescription drug Lomotil. If, however, you develop pain, fever or blood in your stools, a sign of bacterial dysentery, consult a doctor for an antibacterial drug. (The local American embassy or consulate can provide a list of English-speaking physicians.)

By Mary Hossfeld

Important dietary precautions include drinking unbottled water—including ice cubes—only after it has been purified or boiled for one to three minutes (longer at higher altitudes), peeling all fruit and eating other food only if it has been thoroughly cooked. Shellfish, even when cooked, should be avoided when local hygiene is poor; in any country, steer clear of unpasteurized dairy products. For water purification, take along chlorine or iodine purification tablets (for example, Potable-Aqua) or a small boiling element. Filters alone may not be enough to sterilize water, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

If you do come down with diarrhea, replacing lost body fluid is the No. 1 priority. Add oral rehydration salts—a combination of salts and glucose—to bottled or boiled water to make a Gatorade-like drink. (To prepare your  
*(Continued on p. 101)*

## shots and insurance

A medical kit crammed with bug sprays won't protect you completely from yellow fever. And if you get seriously ill—typhoid in Tahiti or appendicitis on a safari, for example—no medicine kit can replace a doctor's care. So before you set forth, make sure your immunizations are up to date, and consider getting insurance for medical care abroad.

To find out which immunizations you need for the countries you plan to visit, call the travelers' health hot line at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta at 404-332-4559. The hot line provides information on which vaccinations are recommended or required for travelers of all ages. It also offers information on disease risk and prevention for different areas, as well as more detailed information on specific problems, ranging from travelers' diarrhea to malaria.

Because many U.S. insurance plans don't cover medical care abroad (including Medicare), you may wish to get temporary health insurance for travelers. Your insurance agent can tell you exactly what your current plan covers. If you're going to a remote area—or if you're traveling with an elderly or ailing person—you should also consider insurance for emergency medical evacuation: The bill for airlifting you home can top \$10,000.

Several companies offer temporary insurance plans for about \$3 to \$10 a day. Call a travel agent or the National Consumer Insurance Helpline (800-942-4242), which answers insurance questions and will mail a list of companies that sell travel health insurance. Note that many foreign hospitals won't deal with your insurance company, so be prepared to pay up front and claim your reimbursement later.

In addition, some travelers may want to pay for a consultation at a travel health clinic. Some clinics primarily offer vaccinations; others show safety videos and tailor recommendations to your medical history and travel plans. Travel Health Services (212-734-3000), a clinic in New York City, can refer you to a local clinic.

Here are some useful travel health publications:

● **Travelers' Health: How to Stay Healthy All Over the World**, by Richard Dawood, M.D. (Random House).

● **International Travel and Health** (World Health Organization, \$13.50); to order, call the United Nations Bookshop at 800-553-3210.

● **Health Hints for the Tropics**; to order, send \$5 to the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, 60 Revere Dr., Suite 500, Northbrook, IL 60062.

—TRINA CHANG

(Continued from p. 81)

own simple version, add one cup of fruit juice and a half-teaspoon of salt to three cups of boiled water.) Oral rehydration salt packets are sold in some pharmacies and can also be bought at cost with a free membership in the nonprofit International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers (IAMAT) at 417 Center St., Lewiston, NY 14092.

**f**or severe infections, make sure you take along a course of antibiotics, especially if you're traveling to remote places or to a country where reliable medical care might be difficult to find. Discuss with your physician the best choice of antibiotic; ideally it should be a so-called broad-spectrum type, effective for a variety of organisms.

If your destination is a country where malaria is endemic—including most of Latin America, Africa and Asia—antimalarial medication will be necessary. To find out which medication is most suitable for the places you'll be visiting, call the CDC (404-332-4559). Medication to prevent malaria is usually started before you leave home, and you'll need to continue taking it while you're in the risk area and for a month after leaving. It's also advisable to pack—and use—a powerful insect repellent. Look for products that contain 30% deet (diethyl-m-toluamide) as the active ingredient.

Of course you should also bring along any medication you are currently taking or might need from time to time: antacids if you're prone to indigestion; antifungal creams if you're susceptible to yeast infections; allergy medications and cold remedies; and antibiotics if you tend to get urinary tract infections. If you suffer from motion sickness, don't forget Dramamine or scopolamine (available in an adhesive patch for absorption through the skin). Also include such first aid items as an antiseptic, an antibiotic cream, Band-Aids and wound dressings.

Always carry essential medicines in your hand luggage, in case your checked baggage gets delayed or lost. Be sure to carry a prescription (with the drug's generic name) from your doctor, or at least a written note of the generic names of your medicines,

should you need replacements. And don't forget an extra pair of eyeglasses or set of contacts, as well as your ocular prescription.

Be careful about buying medicines abroad. Recently there has been concern about fake drugs in many countries—clever imitations of familiar brands that lack the active ingredient. Be especially wary of cut-rate medications or those sold in street markets. The local American embassy or consulate can usually recommend a pharmacy where English is spoken, and IAMAT publishes a list of English-speaking physicians in 450 cities in 120 countries.

On my last trip through Singapore airport, I saw a large sign that read: DEATH BY HANGING TO NARCOTICS TRAFFICKERS. Customs officials in some countries are especially suspicious of unmarked and unidentifiable tablets. The same applies to loose needles and syringes—essential equipment for a diabetic traveler, but if found loose in your suitcase, subject to misinterpretation by customs officials. To avoid trouble, keep all medication in its original container, and keep all medical items together in your medical kit, along with prescriptions.

Jeff's next adventure is a trip to China. You can bet I'll be packing the medical kit myself. ●

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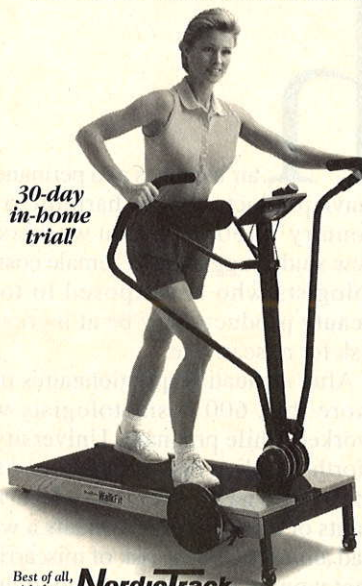
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