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FOREIGN SUBSTANCES

Traveling offers great experiences, but it can also make you sick. Here's how to avoid on-the-road ailments from bacterial infection to motion sickness to jet lag

by Elana Frankel

Back in my college days, while studying art history in Russia, I was invited to a state dinner hosted by local dignitaries and academics. They served an unrecognizable dish that looked something like steak—but menacingly different. As my fork hit the mystery meat, I knew I was in trouble. But I couldn't offend my hosts, so I gulped it down and then took a swig of rusty water. I threw up for days.

"Would you eat unidentified meat at home?" my mother asked when I called to complain. "Then don't in a foreign country."

Traveling abroad can expose you not only to exotic and interesting lands but also to strange and unpleasant illnesses. But we've compiled advice from travel-health experts on staying well on the road, in the air, or on the high seas.

EAT, DRINK, AND BE CAREFUL

When it comes to what you ingest, Dr. Bradley A. Connor, the founder and medical director of Travel Health Services in New York, says you can never go wrong by playing it safe. (My mother was right!) "Do not eat raw seafood, rare meat, or dairy products that have been sitting out unrefrigerated," he warns. "Eat well-cooked fresh foods while they are still piping hot."

Water is the big culprit in most food-related illnesses, particularly in underdeveloped countries where the water may harbor bacteria, viruses, or parasites. Drink only bottled, carbonated beverages or those made with boiled water. If you must drink the tap water, purify it with iodine tablets or a saturated iodine solution, which can be purchased in any pharmacy. And to be safe, skip the ice cubes in your drinks.

Also beware of salad or fruit—it's likely to have been rinsed in water. Dr. Connor advises, "Only eat fruit that you can peel."

MOTION COMMOTION

Sometimes the journey is half the fun; and sometimes it just makes you sick. If you suffer from sea or air sickness, try to sit where you'll feel the least motion. On a plane, try booking a seat over the wing, says Dr. Stuart R. Rose, author of *The International Travel Health Guide*.

And during the flight, avoid turning to talk to the person behind you; holding your head in a stable position will keep your stomach from turning over. For boat travel, stay in the middle of the ship and try not to fight the rocking feeling. Says Dr. Rose: "Pretend you are dancing with the ship."

As for remedies, antihistamines such as Dramamine will help with wooziness, but they may also make you drowsy. Dr. Rose recommends Bucladin-S Softabs, a prescription anti-nausea drug. For an alternative, ask your physician about three-day prescription motion-sickness patches. For some, Seabands, wristbands with acupressure points to relieve sickness, and EarPlanes, earplugs that regulate air pressure and ease discomfort during flight, are also effective.

WHAT A LAG

Moving at great speeds over many time zones can cause headaches, irritability, upset stomach, sleeplessness, gastric discomfort, and chills, otherwise known as jet lag. To minimize the effects, try the following:

- Drink plenty of water before, during, and after the flight to overcome dehydration, which diminishes blood flow to your muscles, reduces kidney functions, and causes fatigue.
- Limit or avoid alcohol and caffeine.
- Try light therapy. When you arrive at your destination, expose yourself to natural light to revitalize your time clock.
- Ask your physician about melatonin, an all-natural hormone supplement that hastens sleep.

A SHOT IN THE ARM

Vaccinations for international travel come in three basic categories: those necessary for entry (e.g., cholera and yellow fever); the old standards (measles, mumps, tetanus, and hepatitis); and those necessary for protection against specific disease (depending upon your destination



and the nature and duration of your stay).

Each nation, again grouped into categories, has its own vaccination requirements: low-risk nations with good health standards (the U.S. and Canada, northern Europe, Australia, and New Zealand); moderate-risk nations with fair health standards (European countries bordering the Mediterranean; Caribbean islands, except Haiti and the Dominican Republic; Israel; South Africa; Japan; and Eastern Europe); and multiple-risk nations (Mexico, Central and South America, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and several countries in Asia and Africa).

You can find information on current conditions and necessary vaccinations at Shoreland Inc., an online pretravel health service (www.shoreland.com; 1-800-433-5256). For customized country searches, contact the Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/travel/travel.html; 404-332-4559.

DOCTOR DIRECTORY

Coming down with the flu (or worse) in another country can be a real drag. Before you travel, find out about health care facilities at your destination. The International Society of Travel Medicine (www.istm.org), an educational organization of more than 1,200 health professionals in 53 countries, maintains a directory of overseas clinics. Or check out *The International Travel Health Guide*, which lists hospitals and doctors all over the world (to order, call 1-800-TRAVMED).

Elana Frankel has written for Metropolis, Small Press, and Presentations magazine.