

# last word

• What to Know Before You Go •

## Self-Prevention, the Latest Health Trend

Dr. Phyllis Kozarsky was already an infectious-diseases expert at Emory University in Atlanta when she visited India in 1987. She had received all the right vaccinations and taken the proper pills, but immediately indulged in all the wrong foods and beverages. "I was so thrilled to be there that I went to a good restaurant and ordered up a storm, including a custard dessert." Within hours she was suffering with fever, vomiting and delirium, and she didn't recover for weeks.

As a result, Kozarsky opened Emory's first travel-medicine clinic and now spends much of her time advising patients that staying healthy abroad depends not only on medication but also on personal behavior. "I've become meticulous," she says. "I've been back to India a number of times—without getting sick."

Advocating self-prevention is a growing trend among travel-medicine experts. Antibiotics ward off traveler's diarrhea, but basic food and water precautions, which also help you avoid dysentery and cholera, are a better method. Antimalarials are essential in many parts of the world, as is the right mosquito repellent. Although drugs protect against altitude sickness, they have side effects; familiarize yourself with the correct climbing pace. And everyone knows about condoms, yet European studies report that many travelers still have unprotected sex with strangers. Says Kozarsky: "People simply do things when they are far away that they wouldn't dream of doing at home."

A recent Loyola University study of 50 well-informed U.S. travelers to Asia, Africa and South America reveals that 8 percent ate street food, 10 percent drank tap

water, 20 percent ordered iced drinks and 35 percent ate salads or raw vegetables. While 82 percent took antimalarials, only 62 percent tried to avoid getting bitten. Says study author Dr. Judith Nerad, "Medications give Americans a false sense of security."

No matter how well acquainted you are with the ABCs of preventive behavior, the following list is a useful reminder.

- Malaria:** Just before dusk, when the malaria-transmitting anopheles mosquito appears, use an insect repellent with deet (spray the ankles carefully), and change into pants, socks and a long-sleeved shirt. Sleep under permethrin-impregnated bed nets.

- Altitude Sickness:** When you're above 8,000 feet, climb high but sleep low—no more than 1,000 feet higher than the night before. Take a day for rest every two to three days. And if you feel sick, descend.

- Food and Water:** Boil it, cook it, peel it or forget it.

- Sex:** Always use a condom. "At the clinic, we put condoms out in a Chinese porcelain bowl, and they disappear instantly," says Emory's Dr. Kozarsky.

"People don't want to follow too many rules on vacation," says Dr. Elaine Jong of the University of Washington Medical Center in Seattle. "They want to escape the constrictions of everyday life. There you are in a beautiful spot, thinking, 'Just this once, it won't hurt.'"

Famous last words. Earlier this year during our honeymoon in Costa Rica, my wife and I sampled seiche and local fruit drinks with ice—and then fell ill. On our next trip, we intend to follow my advice.

—ROBERT BARNETT

