

# healthsmart!

## Medical Precautions While Traveling Abroad

With so many things to plan for before a trip out of the country, your medical needs may get lost in the shuffle. To ensure a safe and healthy return home, you should plan in advance for any medical needs that may arise on your travels. This *HealthSmart!* includes tips and information about how to be prepared for healthy travel to another country and what to do in the case of a medical emergency.

### Before you go

The best time to learn about travel safety is before leaving home. Keep in mind the following while you are planning for your trip abroad:

- Receive a medical checkup from your primary physician so you are knowledgeable about your health status.
- Schedule an appointment with a travel medicine specialist. These medical professionals can assist you with any vaccinations, medications and country-specific health information for your destination. This should be done three to six months prior to your travels to plan appropriate vaccinations.
- Research the countries to which you are traveling. Educate yourself about the countries' health care resources in case you have an emergency while you are there.
- Leave copies of your travel plans, passports and visas with family or friends so you can be contacted in case of an emergency.
- Exchange currency before your trip. Currency exchange booths at the airport charge the highest fees and offer some of the worst rates.
- Some local banks will waive fees to exchange currency if you have an account with them.
- Check with your HMO, health plan or insurance company and get the emergency number to call should you have a major health problem.
- Register with the U.S. Department of State prior to leaving the country. Registering your travel plans with the U.S. Department of State's Travel Registration Web site will enable them to contact you in the case of a family emergency in the U.S. or if there is a crisis where you are traveling. This is a free service. Register online at <https://travelregistration.state.gov>.
- Keep the phone number and address of the local U.S. embassy handy.
- Familiarize yourself with the services offered by U.S. embassies and consular services and where they are located in the

country you are visiting. In general, they provide valuable travel resources including assistance for locating doctors, financial assistance and crisis management. A list of U.S. embassies and their contact information can be found at [www.usembassy.gov](http://www.usembassy.gov).

- Purchase a calling card plan that allows you to make overseas calls, or work with your cell phone provider to ensure you have international calling on your phone. Be sure to get a list of country codes for calling and become familiar with how to make an international call before you leave.
- Take a first-aid course so you can help yourself and others with basic medical services.
- Keep your prescription medications in your purse or carry-on bag and not in your luggage.
- If seriously ill or injured and you have the option, ask to be airlifted back to the U.S.
- Drink bottled water and brush your teeth with bottled water.
- Avoid fruits and vegetables unless they are well cooked to avoid gastrointestinal problems. Thick-skinned fresh fruits and vegetables are usually safe to eat, but be sure to wash your hands first.

## Travel Insurance

On your travels you may decide to take part in high-risk activities such as boating, skiing, mountain climbing, rafting or scuba diving. When traveling abroad, it is important to make sure you have adequate health insurance that will cover you in case of an accident in a foreign country. Some travel insurance excludes high-risk adventures such as mountain climbing, so be sure to ask detailed questions before purchasing the insurance policy.

If you currently have medical insurance, check with your provider to see if it covers you while traveling abroad. Some important questions to ask include:

- Does your insurance apply during independent travel or vacation?
- What are the financial limits of coverage?

- What countries are included in coverage?
- Is emergency evacuation by helicopter, ambulance or other form of transportation covered in the case of a medical emergency?
- Is evacuation to the United States covered?
- What are the specifics of payment and reimbursement policies?
- Is it necessary to contact the insurance company prior to any medical treatment being administered?
- Is a 24-hour emergency telephone line offered?
- Are there any activities that would not be covered by the insurance plan?
- Is motor vehicle coverage offered? If you rent a car while traveling, be sure to have insurance that insures you, the vehicle and any passengers in the case of an accident.

### *Additional Travel Insurance*

Keep in mind that many foreign countries do not accept U.S. medical insurance plans. Many U.S. and foreign companies offer short-term travel insurance plans that cover medical needs and theft or lost property. The U.S. Department of State Web site lists companies that offer assistance. Visit the site at <http://travel.state.gov/travel> for more information. Be sure to consider the above questions about any travel insurance plan you are purchasing.

## Medications

If you need to take medications with you on your trip:

- Be aware of any specific countries' rules regarding what you can bring into the country.
- Leave medications in their original packaging.
- Carry a letter from your physician specifying any prescribed medications and the conditions for which they are taken.
- Know the generic names of your medications. Many foreign countries are not familiar with brand names we use in the U.S.

Some common drugs and their generic names are:

- Advil®/Motrin®/Aleve®: ibuprofen
- Tylenol®/Excedrin®: acetaminophen
- Bayer™: aspirin
- Benadryl® or antihistamine: diphenhydramine
- Dramamine® (motion sickness): dimenhydrinate, meclizine
- Pepto-Bismol®: bismuth subsalicylate
- Antacids: calcium carbonate, aluminum hydroxide or magnesium hydroxide
- Imodium®: loperamide

## Finding medical care abroad

Before your departure, find out as much as you can about medical resources available in the country to which you are traveling. Your travel-medicine physician and your insurance company should be able to offer resources. The U.S. consular officer in the country you are traveling to can assist in locating medical services and informing your family or friends in the event of an emergency. The U.S. embassies and consulates Web site offers access to medical lists for specific countries. For more information, refer to the U.S. Department of State in the Resources section of this guide.

## Financial considerations

In the case of a medical emergency, many foreign countries may only accept cash as payment. Be sure you have appropriate access to cash before you leave home.

- Check to see whether your ATM/debit card is linked to the PLUS® or Cirrus® networks, which allow you to withdraw cash in nearly 210 countries.
- Call your bank or card issuer to get a list of compatible ATMs available where you are traveling.
- Find out if there are amount limits on the cash you can withdraw from the bank each day.

- Be sure you have a PIN number for your credit card that will enable you to make cash withdrawals.
- Account activity in foreign countries can trigger a fraud alert and cause your bank or credit card to freeze your account. Call your bank and credit cards before you leave to let them know where and when you will be traveling.
- Many ATMs abroad, particularly in Europe, do not accept PINs longer than four digits. Also, if your PIN is based on letters rather than numbers, translate the letters into numbers before leaving the country. Many ATMs only have numbers on the keypad.

## Things to take with you

- A travel health kit that includes any prescription medications, an antidiarrheal medication, antibiotics, cold medicine, ibuprofen or aspirin, bandages, motion-sickness medication, water purification tablets, antiseptic cream, and any other special needs you may have.
- Written prescriptions and a letter for their use from your physician.
- Names and contact information for your primary care provider.
- Copies of your vaccination records.
- Copies of your insurance information and emergency contact numbers.
- Your bank and credit card contact information.
- A language book with pictures to help you translate your needs.
- An extra piece of identification, with photo.
- A travel book with country and health information.

## Resources

### UK Travel Medicine Clinic

UK Occupational Medicine and Environmental Health provides consultation in the area of travel medicine. The clinic is conveniently located just off Harrodsburg Road at:

Kentucky Clinic South  
2400 Greatstone Point  
Lexington KY 40504

**[ukhealthcare.uky.edu](http://ukhealthcare.uky.edu)**

Call for an appointment: **859-257-1000**

### U.S. Department of State

Provides many important resources for travelers to foreign countries including travel warnings, country specific health information and travel alerts. Contact information for U.S. embassies and consulates is also available here.

**[www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov)**

For country specific information, travel warnings and travel alerts call:

From within the U.S.: **888-407-4747**

From overseas: **202-501-4444**

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Provides travelers valuable information such as health, food and water precautions in destination countries. The CDC Web site also provides general guidance on health precautions, such as safe food and water precautions and insect-bite protection.

**[www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel)**

International Travelers' Hotline:

**1-877-394-8747**

### American Automobile Association

A member association that is open to anybody for an annual fee. AAA offers travel insurance, car insurance, currency exchange and maps for travel and discounts on many travel services. Many foreign countries honor its membership and offer travel discounts to members.

**[www.aaa.com](http://www.aaa.com)**

Membership information: **1-800-JOIN-AAA**

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Call UK Health Connection at 859- 257-1000 or toll free 1-800-333-8874 to make an appointment or request a referral. Visit us online at [www.ukhealthcare.uky.edu](http://www.ukhealthcare.uky.edu).

**UKHealthCare**