

Healthy Travels

Rick Steves' Guide to Staying Healthy on the Road

By Rick Steves

While I consider Europe, my usual summer destination, as safe as the U.S., those traveling to more exotic destinations should consult a travel medicine physician. Tell the doctor about every place you plan to visit. The Centers for Disease Control offers (and can fax you) updated information on every country (2-hour hotline: 40-332-4559, info by fax: 888-232-3299, info by recorded voice: 888-232-3228, web site: www.cdc.gov/travel/travel.html). Get a medical and dental checkup before any major trip. On the road, pack along a letter from your doctor describing any special health problems and a copy of any pertinent prescriptions.

JET LAG

You can't avoid jet lag, but you can minimize it if you leave home well-rested. Flying halfway around the world is stressful. Plan from the start as if you're leaving two days before you really are. Keep that last 48-hour period sacred. Then you have two orderly, peaceful days after you've packed so that you are physically ready to fly. On the flight, drink plenty of liquids, eat lightly, and rest. The in-flight movie is good for one thing- nap time. On arrival, stay awake until an early local bedtime. If you doze off at 4 p.m. and wake up at midnight, you've accomplished nothing. Plan a good walk until early evening. Jet lag hates fresh air, daylight, and exercise.

TRAVELING HEALTHY GUIDELINES

No matter where I'm traveling, I follow these guidelines.

- Eat nutritiously. The longer your trip, the more you'll be affected by an inadequate diet. Protein helps you resist infection and rebuilds muscles. Supplemental super-vitamins, taken regularly, help me to at least feel healthy. If you have a serious dietary restriction, learn how to describe it in the local language for when you order in restaurants.
- Use good judgment. Avoid unhealthy looking restaurants. Order all meat "well done." Prepared foods gather germs and are a common cause of diarrhea. In rural areas and developing countries, be especially cautious. Peel all fruit. When in doubt, eat only thick-skinned fruit
- Keep clean Wash your hands often, keep your nails clean, and keep your fingers away from your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Exercise. Physically, travel is great living-lots of activity, fresh air, and all those stairs! If you're a couch potato, try to get in shape before your trip by taking long walks. You'll be less likely to strain your muscles while on the road.
- Take breaks. A siesta in your room, a trip back to California in a movie theater, or a splurge in a local restaurant can do wonders for the struggling traveler's spirit.
- Watch the water. Read signs carefully because some taps, like those on trains, are not for drinking from. If there's any hint of nonpotability, avoid it. Water can be treated by boiling it for ten minutes or by using purifying tablets or a filter. Bottled water, beer, wine, boiled coffee and tea, and bottled soft drinks are safe as long as you skip the ice cubes.

TRAVELER'S FIRST AID

Bring along the following: Band-Aids, soap, or alcohol preps (antiseptic handwipes), moleskin, tweezers, thermometer, a non-aspirin pain reliever, medication for colds and diarrhea, and prescriptions and medications (in labeled, original containers). If you'll be hiking in isolated areas, bring a first-aid booklet, Ace bandage, space blanket, and tape and bandages. Those with corrected vision should carry the lens prescription as well as extra glasses in a solid protective case.

- Headaches and other aches: Tylenol (or any other non-aspirin pain reliever) soothes headaches, sore feet, sprains, bruises, Italian traffic hangovers, and many other minor problems.
- Abrasions: Clean abrasions thoroughly with soap and disinfectant to prevent or control infection. Bandages help keep wounds clean but are no substitute for cleaning. A piece of clean cloth can be sterilized by boiling for ten minutes or by scorching with a match.
- Blisters: Moleskin, bandages, tape, or two pairs of socks can prevent or minimize problems with your feet. Cover any irritated area before it blisters.
- Motion sickness: To be effective, medication for motion sickness (Bonine or Dramamine) should be taken several hours before you think you'll need it. This medication can also serve as a mild sleeping pill.
- Swelling: Often accompanying a physical injury, swelling is painful and delays healing. Ice and elevate any sprain periodically for 48 hours. A package of frozen veggies works as a cheap ice pack. Use an Ace bandage to immobilize, stop swelling, and, later, provide support. It is not helpful to work out a sprain.
- Fever: A high fever merits medical attention. To convert from Celsius to Fahrenheit, use the formula $F = (C \times 9/5) + 32$. A temperature of 101 degrees Fahrenheit equals 38.3 degrees Celsius.
- Colds: Haste can make waste when it comes to gathering travel memories. Keep yourself healthy and hygienic. If you're feeling run down, check into a good hotel, sleep well, and force fluids. Stock each place you stay with boxes or juice upon arrival. Sudafed (pseudoephedrine) and other cold capsules are available everywhere.
- Constipation: Constipation is as prevalent as diarrhea. Get exercise and eat lots of roughage: raw fruits, leafy vegetables, prunes, or bran tablets from home.

Diarrhea: To avoid diarrhea, eat yogurt. Its helpful enzymes ease your system into the local cuisine. If you get the runs, take it in stride. It's simply not worth taking eight Pepto Bismol tablets a day or brushing your teeth in Coca-Cola all summer long to avoid a day of the runs. If you get diarrhea, make your diet as bland and boring as possible for a day or so: bread, rice, boiled potatoes, clear soup, and weak tea. Tell yourself that you'll feel better tomorrow. You likely will. If not, drink lots of fluids to replenish lost liquids. Do not take antidiarrheals if you have blood in your stools or a fever greater than 101F. You'll need a doctor's exam and antibiotics. A child (especially an infant) who suffers a prolonged case of diarrhea needs prompt medical attention.

PHARMACIES AND DOCTORS

In many countries, people with minor health problems go first to the local pharmacy, not to their doctor. Pharmacists diagnose and prescribe remedies for most simple problems. They are usually friendly and speak English. If necessary, they'll send you to a doctor. To facilitate smooth communication, it's best to find an English-speaking doctor. Before your trip you can get a list of English or American-trained doctors in member countries who provide services at special rates and offer travel medicine advice. Join IAMAT, the International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (free but donation requested, 417 Center St., Lewiston, NY 14092; 716-754-4883; <http://www.iamat.org/>). While on the road, get a referral from agencies that deal with Americans such as embassies, consulates, American Express companies, large hotels, and tourist information offices.

Healthy travels!

RICK STEVES (425-771-8303 or www.ricksteves.com) is the host of the PBS series *Travels in Europe* and the author of 21 European travel guidebooks, including *Europe Through the Back Door*, all published by John Muir. The first aid section of this article benefited from the input of Dr. Alan Spira and Dr. Craig Karpilow.