HEALTH BASICS

Travel health

Travel health is planning and care that help reduce health risks before, during, and after a trip.

WHAT IT IS
Planning and care that reduce health risks during travel

WHERE IT COMES UP
Before, during, and after domestic or international trips

WHY IT MATTERS
Matches health precautions to your destination and activities

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Travel medicine clinic, pharmacist, or primary care clinician

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Review of itinerary, health history, vaccines, and medicines

Overview

Travel health means preparing for health needs linked to a journey. It covers routine care, destination-specific risks, access to treatment, and what to do if you become unwell while away or after returning.

It is not a disease or a diagnosis. There is no single travel health test or standard plan for every traveler.

Your needs are shaped by where you are going, the season, the length of your stay, and what you plan to do. Your age, pregnancy status, health conditions, medicines, and vaccination history may also affect the plan.

Travel health applies to domestic and international travel. A short city break may need little extra preparation. A longer trip involving remote areas, high altitude, close contact with animals, or limited medical care may require more planning.

How it works

A pre-travel health review matches your itinerary with possible health risks. This may include checking routine vaccinations, discussing destination-specific vaccines, reviewing medicines, and planning how to get care.

It is best to arrange this review several weeks before international travel when possible. Some vaccines need more than one dose or take time to provide protection. If your departure is sooner, a review may still be useful.

Bring a clear itinerary. Include countries, regions, travel dates, accommodation, planned activities, and any long stopovers. Health risks can differ within the same country.

The review may cover:

Travel vaccines are not all the same. Some protect you during a trip. Others may be required as proof of vaccination for entry into certain countries. Requirements can change, so check official destination information close to departure.

There is no routine blood test that shows whether travel is safe. Tests are used only when your health history, destination, or a possible exposure gives a reason for one.

- Routine and travel-related vaccinations
- Malaria risk and whether preventive medicine is appropriate
- Food, water, insect, animal, heat, sun, and altitude exposure
- Safe transport and access to medical care
- Existing conditions, pregnancy, allergies, and regular medicines
- Travel insurance and emergency contact details

Why it matters for your health

Travel can change your usual access to food, water, medicines, sleep, transport, and medical care. Climate, altitude, insects, and local infections may also be unfamiliar.

Planning helps you focus on risks that are relevant to your trip rather than taking unnecessary tests or treatments. For example, malaria prevention is based on the exact destination, time of year, activities, and personal medical factors. It is not needed for every tropical trip.

Routine health needs still matter. Check that you have enough prescribed medicine for the journey and possible delays. Keep medicines in labeled packaging when practical, and carry essential medicines in hand luggage. Some countries restrict medicines that are legal elsewhere, including certain pain medicines, stimulants like methylphenidate or lisdexamfetamine , sedatives, and injectable drugs. Check with the destination's embassy or

another official authority before travel.

Insurance policies may exclude existing conditions, high-risk activities, or medical evacuation. Read the terms rather than assuming all treatment will be covered.

A simple health record can help if you need care. It may include your conditions, allergies, medicines and doses, vaccination record, insurance details, and emergency contacts. Keep a copy separate from the original.

What can go wrong

Travel may be connected with infections such as travelers' diarrhea, influenza, COVID-19, hepatitis A, measles, malaria, dengue, yellow fever, rabies, or other illnesses. Which infections matter depends on the destination and type of exposure.

Food and water contamination can cause vomiting or diarrhea. Bites from mosquitoes, ticks, or other insects can spread infection. Animal bites and scratches may expose you to rabies in countries where it occurs.

Long periods of sitting can contribute to a deep vein thrombosis, which is a blood clot in a deep vein, usually in the leg. Risk is higher for some people because of recent surgery, pregnancy, cancer, previous clots, or other medical factors. Do not start aspirin or another medicine solely for travel unless a clinician has advised it for you.

Heat exhaustion, heatstroke, sunburn, cold injury, and altitude illness can occur when your body has not adjusted to the environment. Road crashes, falls, drowning, and alcohol-related injuries are also important travel risks.

A disrupted routine can affect diabetes, heart or lung conditions, mental health, sleep, and medicine schedules. Crossing time zones may make dose timing more complicated. Ask the clinician or pharmacist responsible for your prescription how to handle time changes rather than changing doses yourself.

Seek emergency help during or after travel for severe trouble breathing, chest pain, fainting, new confusion, signs of stroke, uncontrolled bleeding, a seizure, or severe dehydration. Use the local emergency number while abroad.

Arrange urgent medical assessment for a fever during travel or after returning from an area where malaria occurs. Tell the clinician exactly where and when you traveled. Malaria can become serious quickly, and symptoms may begin after the trip.

Persistent diarrhea, jaundice, worsening rash, an infected wound, or illness after an animal bite also needs prompt assessment. Mild problems that are improving can usually be discussed

through routine follow-up.

What you can do

Start with your itinerary and vaccination record. Check official destination advice and arrange a travel health appointment if the destination, activities, or your medical history suggest that one is needed.

Ask specific questions:

Use insect repellent and other bite precautions as directed where insect-borne diseases occur. Follow local food and water advice. Avoid touching or feeding animals, including apparently healthy dogs, cats, and monkeys.

Use seat belts and appropriate helmets. Avoid driving when tired or affected by alcohol or drugs. Learn local emergency numbers and save your insurer's assistance number.

If you have a complex condition, are pregnant, have a weakened immune system, or plan remote or high-altitude travel, seek advice tailored to those circumstances. Do not stop regular medicine or receive a travel vaccine based only on general online information.

After returning, no test is routinely needed if you are well and had no significant exposure. Keep a record of any animal bite, unprotected sexual contact, freshwater exposure, medical treatment, or illness. That information can guide testing if a clinician later recommends it.

- Are my routine vaccinations up to date?
- Are any vaccines required or recommended for this itinerary?
- Is malaria prevention relevant to the exact places I will visit?
- Are my medicines legal at my destination?
- What care is available if my health condition worsens?
- Does my insurance cover treatment and medical evacuation?

Common questions

Do I need a travel clinic for every trip?

No. Many trips require only routine preparation. A travel medicine service is especially useful for destinations with malaria, yellow fever, limited medical care, or complex vaccine advice. It may also help if you have significant health conditions or a complicated itinerary.

Can I prepare at the last minute?

Yes. Some useful steps may still be possible, even shortly before departure. A clinician can explain which vaccines or medicines may still help and which cannot be completed in time.

Do travel vaccines replace routine vaccines?

No. Routine vaccines remain important because infections such as measles and influenza can spread during travel. Destination-specific vaccines are considered in addition to your usual vaccination schedule.

Should I take antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline in case I get diarrhea?

Not automatically. Whether a standby antibiotic is appropriate depends on your destination, medical history, and access to care. Antibiotics do not treat every cause of diarrhea and can cause side effects. A clinician can advise whether carrying one makes sense for your trip.

Do I need tests when I return?

Usually not if you feel well and had no exposure that requires follow-up. Testing may be considered after certain sexual, blood, animal, freshwater, or infectious exposures. Seek medical advice if symptoms develop, and always mention recent travel.

Sources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Yellow Book: The Pretravel Consultation
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Travelers' Health Destinations
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, After Travel
- World Health Organization, Travel and Health
- NHS Fit for Travel, General Travel Health Advice
- UK Government, Foreign Travel Advice