



# Travel wise

Make sure yours and your family's vaccinations are up to date

**Q:** My youngest son is graduating from high school this year so we are taking a family trip to Mexico during spring break. I've heard that we need to get vaccinated before we go. Is that really necessary? My kids had all of their vaccinations in school.

**A:** Everyone who is going on the trip may need vaccinations, even you. When your children were vaccinated in school, they may not have received all of the vaccines needed to protect them from diseases found in other countries. Standards of hygiene vary in different countries. Food and water may be contaminated. There may be diseases in the country you are going to that do not exist in Canada. Vaccination will help prevent some of the diseases that you and your family could be exposed to while you are on your trip. Your vaccinations may need updating too.

**Q:** Where can we get our vaccinations?

**A:** Vaccinations are available through your local travel clinic. If you live in a large city, there will be special clinics for people who are travelling internationally. In smaller centres or in rural regions, travel immunizations are available at the local public health office. During your visit, a health-care professional will tell you what vaccinations you need based on where you are travelling or what

you will be doing. Plan to visit your travel clinic at least six to eight weeks before you travel to allow enough time for the vaccines to take effect. Make sure to call ahead for an appointment.

Travel clinics offer more than vaccinations. The health professionals at the clinics also give important information on how to travel safely. They can identify what risks are present in the country you are visiting and give helpful advice on how to minimize the danger.

**Q:** Will our health insurance cover us if we need health care while we are there?

**A:** People who travel are responsible for their own health, security, and personal safety. Your provincial health plan may not provide adequate coverage for you and your family while you are away. Be sure to talk to your travel agent about buying private insurance. If you do not have additional insurance and a family member is ill or injured during the trip, you could be responsible for paying thousands of dollars for medical care. Access to medical help may be limited. Ask family members with medical conditions to visit their doctor before leaving. The doctor can advise them on whether they are healthy enough to travel. Anyone who takes medications regularly should make sure to take along enough medicine to last the trip, plus a little more in case their return to Canada is delayed.

**Q:** Should we take along medicine for diarrhea too? One of my friends got really sick when she was away.

**A:** Traveller's diarrhea is the most common illness that people have when they visit tropical and subtropical countries. The Public Health Agency of Canada states the key principles to remember regarding food, water and travel are: boil it, cook it, peel it, or leave it! Traveller's diarrhea can be avoided with a few simple precautions. Using good hygiene and avoiding food and water that may be contaminated will reduce your chance of getting sick. Wash your hands often especially before eating and drinking. Carry hand sanitizer with you for when you do not have access to soap and water. In some cases, your travel health professional will advise you to take some medications with you to take if you become very ill with diarrhea while travelling.

**Q:** We plan on spending a lot of time on the beach, so we will take lots of sunscreen. Are there insects we need to worry about, too?

**A:** In some areas there are mosquitoes that can transmit malaria and dengue when they bite people. There is no vaccine to prevent either illness, so avoid mosquito bites. Mosquitoes that transmit dengue tend to bite during the day and mosquitoes that transmit malaria tend to be active during twilight periods (dawn, dusk and evening). Spray exposed skin and clothing with an insect repellent that contains DEET, and wear loose-fitting clothing with long sleeves and pants. Make sure that you are protected while you are inside, too. The place you stay in should be protected from the outside by closed windows or window screens if the windows are open. You may not get sick from mosquito bites until you return home, so watch for signs of illness and see your doctor right away if you are sick. Your travel health professional can advise you of the risk of infection in the area you are travelling to and what signs of illness to watch for.

Planning for your trip will reduce the risk of the hazards and potential illness that are present in a foreign country. Taking preventative steps before you travel increases the chance that you and your family will have a wonderful vacation together. ●

*Isabel Clark is a telehealth nurse with Calgary Health Link.*

## FYI

For more information on travel, please visit:

**Public Health Agency of Canada**

[www.publichealth.gc.ca](http://www.publichealth.gc.ca)

**Foreign Affairs & International Trade Canada**

[www.voyage.gc.ca](http://www.voyage.gc.ca)

To speak to a health professional, contact your family physician or speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling

**Calgary Health Link:**

Calgary: 403-943-LINK (5465)

Or toll-free: 1-866-408-LINK (5465)

Mandarin Health Link 943-1554

Cantonese Health Link 943-1556