



Planes, Trains & Vaccinations

Take steps to protect
your health while
travelling outside
of the country

By Debbie Olsen

You've just booked an all-inclusive vacation to a beachfront resort in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico with an online travel company. You're going to need your passport, suntan lotion, a new swimming suit ... But is there something you're missing? How about a Hepatitis A vaccine? Many travellers do not realize that immunization against Hepatitis A is recommended for all people travelling to countries like Mexico, and that's why booking an appointment at a travel clinic should be an important part of your travel planning. A travel health nurse can provide you with immunizations and preventative medications that are recommended for your destination as well as sound advice on how to stay healthy while you are away from home.

“Getting sick can wreck your trip and affect your health long after you return home,” says Greg Mills, who contracted malaria on a trip to Africa.



Point of Contact: Travellers' Health Services

For information on services, hours of operation or to make an appointment, phone the centralized call centre at 735-0100 Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. It is best to call at least 6 to 8 weeks prior to your expected departure date. There is a \$40 charge for visiting the travel clinic, but if you require a vaccination, the charge will be applied to the cost of the vaccination. There is a \$61 charge for a Hepatitis A vaccination. You can also purchase mosquito nets, repellents, antibacterial hand rinse, water purification tablets, and other useful travel health supplies at Capital Health travel clinics.

Clinic locations

- Edmonton (Main Office)
Suite 440, North Tower
Capital Health Centre
10030 107 Street
- Strathcona County Health Centre
2 Brower Drive, Sherwood Park
- St. Albert Public Health Centre
23 Sir. Winston Churchill Avenue
St. Albert

Web

www.capitalhealth.ca/travellers

Canadians make more than 100 million trips abroad annually and most come back safe and well, but a few become ill. In many cases, these illnesses could have been prevented. “Nobody ever thinks it will happen to them,” says Cathy Becker, a travel nurse who works at Capital Health’s travel clinic.

“Sometimes travellers fail to take preventative medications, forget to update immunizations, or get careless about the food they eat or the water they drink and they end up bringing home more than they bargained for. A few preventative measures can save your health.”

Greg Mills*, an Edmonton minister, never imagined he would become ill on a recent trip to Africa. “I travel so much that I guess I just let my guard down,” says Mills. “I had been to Africa many times before and I was only planning to be there for five days this past December. Since I had been told that the mosquitoes weren’t very bad at that time of year, I reasoned that if I used a good repellent and slept under a mosquito net that I should be able to forgo the anti-malarial drugs I usually take when I travel there. I sometimes have side effects from the drugs, so I figured it would be better for my health to avoid taking them.”

Despite the precautions he took, a mosquito bit Mills while he was sleeping and about a week after he returned home from his trip, he became quite sick. “We looked up the symptoms of malaria on the Internet and I had all of them including aches, fever, chills and nausea. Blood tests confirmed that I had malaria and I ended up spending two days in the University of Alberta Hospital just before Christmas. My family was very worried and my doctor was not too pleased with me for not taking the medication prescribed,” explains Mills.

“I’m planning another trip abroad in the near future, but this time I plan to listen to the professionals. You have to realize that you’re not invincible and take appropriate precautions when you travel. Getting sick can wreck your trip and affect your health long after you return home. It’s been almost five months and I’m still not quite back to normal,” he says.

If you are planning to travel abroad, make sure you book your appointment with the travel clinic well in advance. “We recommend that clients book their appointments a minimum of six to eight weeks in advance. Almost 20,000 people visited Capital Health’s travel clinics last year and at peak travel times it can be particularly busy. It’s also an advantage to get your vaccinations early, because some vaccinations take time to become fully effective or require booster shots to give maximum protection,” says Pat Crick, manager of Travellers’ Health Services for Capital Health. “The nurses and medical staff who work at the clinics are experts that will give you good solid travel advice to assist in planning your trip. We consider ourselves part of the travel experience.”

Medical staff at the travel clinic take into consideration a variety of factors when recommending health and safety measures. Based on your current health, your travel locale, your travel itinerary, and your previous immunization history they may recommend vaccinations or medications that can help to prevent disease. In countries where sanitary conditions are poor, it is likely the nurse will recommend immunizations for Hepatitis A and/or Typhoid. “The nurses at the travel clinic aren’t frivolous when they recommend a vaccine or a medication,” says Mills. “You need to listen carefully and follow their advice if you want to avoid getting ill.”

Diarrhea is the most common complaint for travellers. It is usually caused by drinking impure water or by eating foods prepared with local water.

Staying Healthy and Safe Abroad

Vaccinations and medications do not guarantee absolute protection against disease. It is important to take other precautions to preserve your health and further minimize your risk of acquiring disease. Although the preventative measures you need to take while travelling will vary depending on your destination and travel itinerary, there are some general things you can do to stay healthy while you are away from home.

Travellers' Diarrhea or Turista: Diarrhea is the most common complaint for travellers. It is usually caused by drinking impure water or by eating foods prepared with local water. When travelling in developing countries the rule of thumb is: boil it, cook it, peel it or leave it. Always drink purified water and pasteurized milk. Avoid ice, salads, uncooked shellfish, fruit that is not peeled and food from street vendors. If you get diarrhea, be sure to drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration. It's also a good idea to bring anti-diarrhea and fever or headache medications along with you when you travel.

Insect Bites: Preventing insect bites is very important to help prevent contraction of diseases like Malaria, Yellow Fever, Dengue Fever, or West Nile Virus. Use mosquito repellents with 25 to 30% DEET when outside and wear long pants and long sleeves between dawn and dusk. Sleep in a well-screened accommodation or use a bed net.

Sunburn: In warmer climates you should wear a hat, protective sunglasses and a good sunblock with a minimum SPF of 15. Make sure your sunblock is waterproof if you plan to be in the water. It's also a good idea to drink plenty of

liquids when you plan to be outside in the heat and sun.

Avian Influenza: While avian flu is not very prevalent, it has received a lot of media coverage and is a concern for travellers. You can minimize your risk of contracting this disease by avoiding live bird farms and markets. It is fine to eat chicken and eggs as long as they are well-cooked.

Germ: Washing your hands is the best way to avoid disease at home and abroad. It's a good idea to carry an alcohol-based disinfecting hand wash or alcohol-based travel wipes in your bag, so that you can disinfect your hands when soap and water are unavailable.

Safety Awareness: You probably wouldn't ride a bicycle at home without a helmet, so you should wear a helmet when you are riding in another country. Traffic conditions are often very different from those in Canada, so you need to be particularly careful. It is generally recommended to avoid renting motorcycles or mopeds, especially at night outside urban areas. Be careful when driving any motor vehicle at night, especially on country roads. Motor vehicle accidents cause the majority of deaths among travellers abroad.

Travelling is one of the great pleasures of life and a wonderful trip can create lasting memories. Making a stop at a travel clinic before embarking on your next adventure will help to ensure that memories are the only thing you come home with. ❧

**name changed by request*

What You Should Know About Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is the most common serious health problem for travellers that can be prevented by inoculation with a vaccine. The disease is caused by a virus that infects the liver. Although it occurs worldwide, it is most common in developing countries due to poor sanitary conditions.

Cause: Hepatitis A Virus (HAV)

Symptoms: May include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea and jaundice (yellow eyes)

Length of illness: One to two weeks or several months depending upon the severity of the case.

Transmission: HAV is usually spread by food, water or shellfish contaminated with sewage. People who prepare food can also spread the disease if they are infected with the virus and don't wash their hands properly.

Vaccine: Hepatitis A vaccine gives a very high level of protection and is given in two doses between six to 12 months apart. The vaccine causes the body to produce antibodies that provide protection for 20 years or more in adults.

Know Before You Go

Conditions in other countries are often vastly different from those in Canada. Before you book a trip, it's a good idea to apprise yourself of the risks associated with visiting that destination and the precautions you should take to have a safe and healthy journey.

- Capital Health has an excellent travel website that provides general health recommendations for most destinations. It also has travel tips and disease information. Head to www.capitalhealth.ca/travellers.
- Canada's Consular Affairs Department has a list of travel reports and/or travel advisories for most countries. Visit their website at www.voyage.gc.ca.
- The Public Health Agency of Canada's Travel Medicine Program provides valuable information for travellers including current information on international disease outbreaks, general health advice, immunization recommendations and disease treatment and prevention guidelines. Go to www.travelhealth.gc.ca.