

Traveling Abroad? Make Sure Plans Include Trip to the Doctor

2012-06-10



Traveling Abroad | Wellness magazine

Saint Louis University Travel Health Expert Offers Five Tips for a Healthy Vacation

If you're one of the millions of Americans who will travel abroad this summer, make sure your plans include a trip to the doctor, says H. Thomas Johnson, M.D., a Saint Louis University family physician.

Ideally, Johnson says, travelers should make an appointment six months before traveling to the most exotic locations because some vaccines, such as hepatitis A and B, require six months to receive

both the first dose and booster. However, if you do not have six months, Johnson still recommends getting the first vaccine, as it will provide some protection. For travelers visiting more mainstream destinations such as the tourist areas of Mexico, Johnson still recommends checking in with your doctor. "Your doctor can tell you about any necessary precautions or recommended vaccines," explained Johnson, who is an expert in travel medicine. "He or she can also prescribe important medications such as an antibiotic to bring with you in case you develop traveler's diarrhea or a patch to prevent sea sickness."

The key to successful travel, Johnson says, is planning ahead. He recommends these five tips for a healthy and safe vacation.

1. **Pack smart:** Make sure to bring plenty of your regular medications, both prescribed and over-the-counter, in your carry-on luggage. However, controlled substances must be in their original pharmacy container, and over-the-counter liquid medications must meet the TSA guidelines, which require that liquids be in three-ounce or smaller containers and fit in one quart-size clear plastic bag. In addition to your regular medications, don't forget the basics: pain relievers, medicine for nausea and heartburn, bandages, antibacterial ointment and antibacterial hand wipes.

2. **Enjoy the sun, safely:** Nothing ruins a vacation like getting a sunburn on the first day. Using a sunscreen with a minimum of a 30 SPF is especially important when visiting tropical destinations. However, even if you will not be tanning on a beach, you can still get a burn while sightseeing or driving in a car, so make sure to apply sunscreen every day.

3. **Keep the bugs away:** Bug spray with 30 to 50 percent DEET is especially important if you are traveling to places where malaria is present. In addition, if you will be sleeping outdoors or in huts, bring a mosquito net.

4. **Be cautious about what you eat and drink:** Anyone traveling to Mexico has heard the

warning to not drink the water. Johnson cautions that just avoiding the water is not enough. In addition to water and ice, the general rule of thumb is if it's not peeled, boiled or cooked, avoid it. This includes fresh vegetables and fruits, as well as undercooked meats and raw fish. Be particularly careful when purchasing food and drinks from street vendors and make sure the seal is not broken on bottled water.

5. Bring your personal health information: Think of it as insurance – you hope you don't need it, but if something goes wrong, it can be a real lifesaver. Having medical information, such as on all current prescription and over-the-counter medications, chronic conditions and vaccine information will help the treating physician if you have a medical emergency. Store the information in your suitcase, on a USB drive or on a small card in your wallet, but make sure someone knows where the information is stored in case you are unconscious.

Established in 1836, Saint Louis University School of Medicine has the distinction of awarding the first medical degree west of the Mississippi River. The school educates physicians and biomedical scientists, conducts medical research, and provides health care on a local, national and international level. Research at the school seeks new cures and treatments in five key areas: cancer, liver disease, heart/lung disease, aging and brain disease, and infectious disease.