

MEDICAL ADVICE | TRAVEL | BACKPACKERS ADVICE LEAFLET

This advice identifies a few key points you should consider in advance of your trip – it is not comprehensive and you should read further general travel health. Some extremely useful information sources are also provided.

Backpacking refers to self-organised trips, which usually involve travelling on foot or public transport and staying in simple cheap accommodation. This can expose travellers to additional health risks. The term 'backpacker' is now not very specific since a traditional 'backpack' or rucksack is now often used by other groups of travellers including those on organised holidays and expeditions.

This leaflet will also be useful for gap year travellers who are taking a year out before going on to further education, training or employment.

Beware of the risk of accidents

Accidents are very common when trekking and also when travelling on poor roads in badly maintained vehicles. Motorcycling can be extremely hazardous.

Contamination of food and water

This is a major cause of illness in travellers in particular travellers' diarrhoea. Unless certain of the purity of the local water supply, stick to boiled or bottled water and avoid ice in drinks. Alternatively, water can be sterilised with iodine drops/tablets or with a quality filter. Dishes and cutlery should ideally be washed with sterilised water. Hot tea, coffee, canned and bottled beer and wine are usually safe. Ensure that milk has been pasteurised and that cheese, cream and ice cream are made from milk that has been pasteurised. Peel all fruit, eat only cooked vegetables and avoid salads. Ensure that seafood, fish and meat are thoroughly cooked and eaten hot whenever possible. Avoid leftovers. Wash hands before eating or handling food and always after using the toilet.

Mosquito, other insect and animal bites

These can be minimised through wearing suitable clothing, using repellents and an impregnated mosquito net. Do not approach stray dogs that are frequently not friendly as at home.

Unsafe sex

Particularly, but not exclusively, unsafe sex with commercial sex workers will put travellers at risk of serious infections including HIV.

A comprehensive first aid kit is important

You should consider including something for simple diarrhoea, sufficient anti-malarial tablets, possibly an antibiotic, and emergency malarial treatment if going to areas remote from medical facilities. If you have time before you leave, it is very valuable to undertake a short first aid course.

Culture shock

This can be very real. Family or social difficulties at home and psychological problems, including alcoholism, make adapting difficult. Time differences between continents might increase isolation when it is difficult to maintain contact with friends and relatives. A situation that is exciting and welcome to one person can be daunting to another.

Useful internet sites

VSO
CDC

Foreign & Commonwealth Office
World Health Organisation

Useful telephone numbers

All these telephone numbers attract a premium rate call charge fee

- **Hospital for Tropical Diseases** [09061 337733](tel:09061337733) (also run a travel clinic)
- **Hospital for Tropical Diseases Fax-Back** information service [09061 991992](tel:09061991992)
- **TRAVAX** [0906 550 0059](tel:09065500059)
- **Malaria Reference Laboratory** [09065 508 908](tel:09065508908)
- **The Medical Advisory Service for Travellers Abroad** (MASTA) [09068 224 100](tel:09068224100), for detailed briefs - more than 6 destinations call [01705 553 933](tel:01705553933)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office telephone numbers (not premium)

- **General enquiries** [020 7270 1500](tel:02072701500)
- **Consular enquiries** [020 7008 0218](tel:02070080218)
- **Travel advice** [020 7008 0232](tel:02070080232) / 0233
- **Visa enquiries** [020 7008 8438](tel:02070088438)

See Also

- Worldwide travel clinic directories on the [International Society of Travel Medicine](#) or [ASTMH Online](#)
- Puddletown Surgery | [Backpackers Packing List](#) (requires Acrobat Reader)