

International Travel: Being Prepared for a Medical Emergency

By Dr. Chris Sidford

Simple preparation for international travel can help alleviate fears and make you better prepared in case a medical emergency occurs. I like to break the preparation down to those things we can do before we leave and those things that will make us better prepared once we arrive at our destination.

Patients with Chronic Medical Conditions

Patients with chronic medical conditions are advised to schedule an appointment with their primary care physician a couple of weeks ahead of their departure. To avoid a flare-up of your condition, a last tune-up or adjustment in medications can make the difference between relaxing and enjoying your vacation and trying to hold on until you return. You can always cancel an appointment if it's not necessary.

Invest in a Basic First Aid and CPR Course

Basic first aid and CPR training is a good idea at home and can be even more useful when away from home. Unfortunately, such training can be virtually absent in even the best resorts around the world. If your house staff or nannies are traveling with you, they too should be trained. If you are traveling with children and planning on using the local childcare service, obtain information about the first aid and CPR training they have in advance of your departure. This may be helpful in making your decision as to which resort is better for you.

Don't Forget to Bring a Basic First Aid Kit

Basic first aid kits are generally advised. I like to start with a sampling of over-the-counter medications that you tend to use frequently. These may be difficult or at least bothersome to obtain at pharmacies abroad. First aid supplies such as waterproof bandages, simple antibiotic ointments, and blister dressings can be very handy. Burn creams and insect bite ointments can also be included, particularly if jellyfish might be found where you are headed. Liquid skin adhesives are challenging in even the most experienced hands and tend to be more trouble than they are worth. Steri-Strips, on the other hand, are relatively simple to use and can be remarkably effective.

If you take prescription medications, remember to carry them with you and take additional doses in case of travel delays (remember when volcanic ash disrupted European travel for weeks last year?). Lost medications can sometimes be replaced at pharmacies overseas if you carry a hard copy of the original prescription.

Traveling to an Exotic Destination

If an exotic destination is part of your travel, evaluation by a travel medicine specialist is also advised. The proper selection of immunizations and prophylactic medications can vary a great deal depending on such factors as time of year, altitude, and even the hotel or resort where you may be staying. Some immunizations, such as hepatitis A, require six weeks between the first and second dose. So, try to schedule an appointment at least two months in advance of your departure date. In a recent survey of travelers to a malaria endemic area (destinations that include Africa, India, Thailand, Indonesia, and parts of the Caribbean), less than half the people brought medications to prevent malaria.

Evacuation Insurance

Evacuation insurance is recommended for all travelers. They are not all the same. Although some of the higher-end credit cards offer their accountholders access to such services, that does not necessarily mean that you are insured for the costs. You have access to the services, but there are a number of exclusion criteria which could leave you responsible for costs upwards of \$100,000. Evacuation insurance can be purchased for a year or on a one-day basis. It's important to have a close look at the fine print of such policies. Sports injuries, alcohol use, mental health, and pregnancy are some typical exclusions. If your illness or injury requires a lengthy hospitalization, the ability to return to a hospital near your hometown, referred to as "take me home," is well worth having. Another important feature is whether or not your regular physician can speak on your behalf (i.e., essentially act as your medical guardian) regarding decisions involving your need for hospitalization and evacuation.

General Peace of Mind

Should you ever feel that you want additional peace of mind while you are traveling, you can hire a global emergency medicine company, which will give you 24/7 direct access to a highly qualified emergency medicine physician.

International travel, whether for business or pleasure, always has its exciting moments. Do your best to prepare yourself before you travel so that the exciting moments are about your vacation or a business deal and not about a medical emergency.