

Obtaining Health Care Abroad

The quality and availability of medical care abroad may be variable. Before departure, travelers should consider how they would access health care during their trip should a medical problem arise. Travelers may seek medical care while abroad for a range of reasons.

1. Invest in a small medical kit that will cover commonly occurring problems for travelers (see Packing a Medical Kit handout)
2. Check to see what your current insurance covers and purchase travel insurance, if needed. See CDC.gov or IAMAT.org for details on the types of coverage that are recommended. Bear in mind that covering a sore throat visit in the US is very different coverage than having to be evacuated for life-saving care, which is typically not covered but very expensive. The UCSHIP provides some coverage and assistance for travel abroad. Check website for details.
3. Find local healthcare facilities in your destination BEFORE you depart and store this information with your other essential documents. Most countries do not have an equivalent of 911 services nor are clinics accredited to assure quality medical care. While we cannot endorse any particular clinics, the following services will prove helpful:
 - a. The Department of State (www.usembassy.gov) can help travelers locate medical services and notify friends, family, or employer of an emergency
 - b. The International Society of Travel Medicine maintains a directory of health care professionals with expertise in travel medicine in more than 80 countries worldwide. Search these clinics at www.istm.org.
 - c. The International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers maintains an international network of physicians, hospitals, and clinics that have agreed to provide care to members while abroad. Membership is free, although donations are suggested. Search for clinics at IAMAT.org.
 - d. The Joint Commission International (JCI) aims to improve patient safety through accreditation and certification of health care facilities worldwide. Facilities that are accredited through JCI are said to demonstrate a standard level of quality. A list of these facilities can be found at www.jointcommissioninternational.org/JCI-Accredited-Organizations.
 - e. Embassies and consulates in other countries, hotel doctors, and credit card companies (especially those with special privileges) may also provide information.

- f. Supplemental medical insurance plans acquired before travel will often enable access to local providers in many countries through a 24-hour emergency hotline.

In addition to identifying quality health care, travelers, especially those with chronic or complicated medical issues, should know the names of their chronic conditions and allergies, their blood type, and current medications (including generic names), ideally in the local language. Travelers should also wear medical identification jewelry (such as a MedicAlert bracelet), if appropriate.

AVOID TRAVEL WHEN SICK

Travelers should evaluate their health before travel to ensure that they are healthy enough for their itinerary and should avoid travel if they become ill before or during their trip. Some airlines check for visibly sick passengers in the waiting area and during boarding. If a passenger looks visibly ill, the airline may prohibit that person from boarding.

BLOOD SAFETY

A medical emergency abroad, such as a motor vehicle accident or trauma, could result in need for a blood transfusion. Not all countries have accurate, reliable, and systematic screening of blood donations for infectious agents, which increases the risk of transfusion-related transmission of disease. Although it is difficult to ensure access to safe blood, there are a few measures travelers can take to increase their chances of having a safe blood transfusion in the event of a medical emergency:

- Avoid blood transfusions as much as possible, particularly in developing countries. Travelers should receive a blood transfusion only in life-or-death situations.
- If a blood transfusion is required, travelers should make every effort to ensure that the blood has been screened for transmissible diseases, including HIV. Although this is difficult to do at the point of service, travelers who plan ahead, especially those with medical conditions that might require transfusions, and locate medical services before traveling will increase their chances of obtaining higher-quality care abroad.
- Travelers may consider registering with agencies such as the Blood Care Foundation that attempt to rapidly deliver reliable blood products to members while abroad (www.bloodcare.org.uk/blood-transfusions-abroad.html).

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