



Travel Health Risks Surgery

Dr. Jane Wilson-Howarth, *8 Weeks To Go* campaign spokesperson, GP and travel health expert answers some frequently asked questions about travel health risks.

Q. What are my chances of actually falling ill on holiday?

One in two British travellers become ill or are injured on holiday¹ so it is quite feasible that you could be at risk. There is no such thing as risk-free travel, no matter where you are going or staying. Even countries only a few hours away can have very different health risks to the UK.

Q. What are the main health risks for British travellers?

It depends on where you are travelling to, the time of year and your medical history. That is why it is crucial to seek up-to-date advice from a healthcare professional. Risks range from traveller's diarrhoea and sunstroke, to road traffic accidents and infectious diseases (such as hepatitis, rabies and malaria). All of these could ruin your holiday or worse. The good news is that you can reduce your risk by following advice from your GP, practice nurse or travel health clinic/pharmacy.

Q. I have been travelling many times and have never fallen ill so why should I seek health advice before my next trip?

You may not have been ill or had an accident on your last few trips abroad, but it is still important to remember that there is no such thing as risk-free travel. In fact, one in two British travellers have experienced an illness or injury on holiday requiring some form of medical attention¹. Every destination is unique and even

countries just a few hours away can have very different health risks to the UK. It's important to seek advice before every trip, for example, you may need to top-up or have different vaccinations.

Q. I tend to book my holiday last minute, which means I'm too late to seek advice 6-8 weeks before I travel. What should I do?

Ideally you should seek advice 6-8 weeks before you go but it's never too late. Timely consultations may save money and allow appointments at convenient times but last minute immunisation is possible, although sometimes it gives less protection. You can try getting a last minute appointment at your GP surgery but more likely you'll have to attend a private travel clinic/pharmacy.

Q. I will be staying in a luxury five star hotel and have no plans to travel outside of the resort – surely the health risks will be minimal?

Unfortunately you don't need to travel off the beaten track to be exposed to health risks. Something as simple as slipping at the side of the pool, or sipping a cocktail could ruin your holiday by putting you at risk of an infectious disease. You may find that you end up in a hospital or clinic where medical and hygiene standards may differ to those in the UK as in some regions equipment used in clinics, including needles, may not be sterile. Make sure you reduce your risk by seeking personal, up-to-date, expert advice. It's important that you visit your GP surgery or travel health clinic/pharmacy 6-8 weeks before overseas travel.

Q. I've checked the internet and know what precautions I need to take whilst I'm away so do I still need to visit my GP surgery or travel health clinic/pharmacy before travelling?

It's always good to do your own research so that you are familiar with the specific health risks in the country you are visiting but your GP, nurse or travel health clinic/pharmacy healthcare professional will be able to give you personal, up-to-date, expert advice. The internet is an invaluable resource, but make sure you are visiting



bespoke sites such as www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad, www.NaTHNaC.org, www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk and www.malariahotspots.co.uk (A GlaxoSmithKline website) The best advice is to speak to your GP surgery or travel health clinic/pharmacy 6-8 weeks before you travel.

Q. I'm only going on a beach holiday in Europe with friends – surely nothing can go wrong there?

Whilst a beach holiday can be fun, it's important to remember that there is no such thing as risk-free travel. Countries only a few hours away can have very different health risks to the UK. Spending hours sunbathing can result in sunburn and heat-stroke and can cause serious problems in travellers, but these can be preventable. Although you are only holidaying in Europe there are still some countries for which it is wise that you reduce your risk by seeking personal, up-to-date, expert advice from your GP surgery, travel health clinic/pharmacy 6-8 weeks before your overseas trip.

Q. I have lived in the UK for the past two years and am going back home to visit relatives for a few days. I know the area well and don't see the point in visiting my healthcare professional before I travel. Surely they won't tell me anything about my country that I don't already know?

Visiting familiar surroundings can still put you at risk of contracting a serious illness or having an accident, even if you are away for just a few days. Many travellers returning home believe that because they used to live in that country they are immune to diseases found in that area. It's important to know that partial immunity for malaria fades just 6-12 months after leaving your country of origin². It is essential that you make an appointment with your GP surgery, travel health clinic/pharmacy 6-8 weeks before overseas travel for personal, expert up-to-date advice.

Q. I have an existing health condition. What can I do to reduce my risk of falling ill whilst I'm away?

It's a good idea to visit your GP surgery 6-8 weeks before travel so they can give you personal up-to-date travel advice and ensure you have plenty of your prescription medication whilst you are away. Make sure you take out adequate travel insurance that will cover all your needs including medical repatriation in the event of a serious illness. And always tell the insurance company about your pre-existing medical condition as this is vital to guarantee all your medical needs are catered for.

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1. Survey commissioned by the Department of Health, carried out by tickbox.net in February-March 2009 with a total sample size of 2,178
2. Malaria – Chapter 7, in International Travel and Health report, *World Health Organisation*, 2007. Available at: http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2007/9789241580397_7_eng.pdf [Accessed 10 February 2010]

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