

FALL 2011

# Healthy Travels

## Buckle up!

While many travelers are aware of the risk of infection while traveling, few realize tourists are ten times more likely to die as a result of injury than infection while traveling. Of these injuries, motor vehicle crashes are the number one killer of healthy US citizens traveling to foreign countries. According to the CDC, an estimated 3,500 people worldwide die each day in motor vehicle crashes involving cars, buses, trucks, motorcycles, bicycles, or pedestrians<sup>1</sup>. However, injuries while traveling are largely preventable. Following these steps and using common sense while traveling will decrease your risk of injury and death and make your travels safer and more enjoyable.

Wear a seat belt. Always wear a seat belt when riding in a vehicle, regardless of the laws of the country in which you're visiting. If you are renting a car, ensure it has operable seat belts before you drive off the rental lot. If you are riding in a taxi, make sure that the seat belts are present and operational before you agree to the fare. Using a hotel's taxi service may cost a little bit more than taking a cab from the street, but you'll likely get a vehicle that is in good shape and with working seat belts.

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## The Hot Seat

The formation of a deep vein thrombosis, or DVT, is a health threat which requires immediate medical attention. DVTs can form with long travel, whether by plane, bus, train, or car.

## What is a DVT?

A DVT is a blood clot that is trapped inside a large vein in the lower leg and thigh. Once formed, the clot can block blood flow and cause swelling and pain. Clots may also dislodge and move through the bloodstream. This is called an embolism, and can travel to vital organs in the body such as the lungs, brain, or heart and result in life-threatening organ damage.

## What are symptoms of DVT?

For many people, DVTs may not produce any symptoms. For others, DVT symptoms may include painful swelling, skin redness, tenderness, or warmth in one leg more than the other. Shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness, fainting, or anxiety may indicate a pulmonary embolism, which is a clot in the lung and is a medical emergency. Patients with these symptoms should seek immediate medical attention.

## How to minimize your exposure during travel

Before traveling, be sure to tell your doctor if you suffer from any health issues and of all the over-the-counter (including herbal) medications you are taking. If you are at higher risk of developing clots, your doctor may prescribe compression stockings or blood thinning medications prior to travel. If your physician recommends special accommodations during travel, you should contact your airline, bus, or train customer service department before you leave for your trip.

Every traveler, regardless of risk, can take simple steps during travel to help prevent DVTs.

1. Change positions regularly during travel. Occasionally move about the cabin as permitted. Avoid crossing your legs at the knees or ankles for long periods of time. There are also some simple leg exercises that can be done in an airplane seat to help reduce risk of DVTs.
2. Remain well hydrated. Avoid dehydrating drinks, such as caffeinated beverages and alcohol.
3. Wear comfortable clothes during travel. Tight clothing may further restrict movement and blood flow, especially around the waist and legs.

## What are the risk factors for DVTs during travel?

Sitting or lying for a long time without moving, such as in a plane, train, or car, can increase risk of developing DVT. It is estimated that the risk of developing a DVT after long distance air travel, such as flights longer than 3000 miles, is low in the general population; however, up to 10% of distance travelers may develop DVTs without realizing it. The longer the flight, the greater the risk of developing a DVT. Air travel has an increased risk, due to limited space in coach seating, low humidity and lower oxygen of the plane, and dehydration from not drinking enough water during the flight<sup>1</sup>.

Travelers with medical conditions and/or those taking certain medications are also at increased risk of DVT. Most travelers who get DVTs have medical risk factors, including history of previous clots, chronic diseases and cancer, obesity, age over 60 years old, use of oral contraceptives or hormone replace therapy (HRT), pregnancy, or recent surgery or broken bones. Women are also at higher risk than men.

## Buckle up!

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Bring a child safety seat. If you travel with small children, bring your safety seat or booster seat from home. Many countries don't have car seats available, especially in taxis. Using a safety or booster seat puts your child in the right position to be properly restrained in case of a crash.

Watch out for hazards on the road. When possible, avoid driving at night or other times of low visibility. Road hazards, including potholes, speed bumps, other vehicles, and sudden drop-offs, are more difficult to see at night and may be missed if you're tired or if visibility is poor. In addition, always be mindful of which side of the road you're supposed to be driving on!

Wear a helmet. If you're planning on riding a motorcycle or bicycle, make sure you're always wearing a helmet. You may be better off bringing one from home if this is part of your agenda while traveling. Many motorcycle or bicycle taxis do not provide helmets.

Vehicles and alcohol don't mix. Alcohol increases the risk for all causes of injury. If you've been drinking, don't operate a motor vehicle, bike, or boat, and don't be a passenger with anyone who has been drinking.

Look both ways before you cross the street. Pedestrians don't always have the right-of-way on the roads in other countries, and pedestrian-vehicle accidents are a leading cause of death worldwide<sup>1</sup>. Pay attention to which direction traffic is moving, be sure to look both ways before crossing, and use crosswalks when available.

Know your risks before you travel. Country-specific information on road safety is available online from the Association for International Road Travel at [www.asirt.org/](http://www.asirt.org/). If you are planning on doing the driving while you travel, the State Department has information on road safety, international driving permits, and insurance at [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov). Further information on road safety worldwide is available from the World Health Organization at [www.who.int/roadsafety/en/](http://www.who.int/roadsafety/en/).

## Here Comes the Sun

Many of the most enjoyable vacation activities include sun exposure but many travelers discount the need to prevent themselves from the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays until it's too late. Don't spoil a great travel experience with sunburn! UV radiation exposure can cause premature skin aging, skin cancer, and a host of skin changes. Sunburns can become a medical emergency. It's not only the skin that's at risk; the eyes can get burnt too. Cataracts and other sun-related eye damage can lead to irreversible loss of vision.

Protecting ourselves from harmful effects of UV radiation doesn't mean that we have to avoid tropical vacation spots or only venture out at night. You may benefit from these simple rules of prevention:

- » Try to stay out of the sun during midday hours in the summer months and when visiting a country close to the equator.
- » Never fall asleep in the sun. Bring an alarm, such as on a cell phone or watch, and set to short intervals to wake you and remind you to turn over or move into the shade if you're out sunbathing.
- » When relaxing at a sunny location, seek out shady areas or create shade yourself. Beach umbrellas are an excellent way to stay shaded.
- » Wear protective clothing, such as a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses protective against 100% of both UVA and UVB rays, and, loose-fitting clothing that covers the arms and legs.
- » Liberally cover any exposed skin areas with sunscreen that is a SPF 15 or higher and reapply every 2-3 hours, after swimming, or after any activity that results in excessive sweating.
- » Children are more sensitive to sunburns and UV radiation but less likely to be the ones thinking about sunscreen and sunglasses. Therefore, it is up to parents and guardians to ensure children enjoy outdoor activities safe from excessive sun exposure.

For more information, visit the WHO's webpage on ultraviolet radiation: [www.who.int/topics/ultraviolet\\_radiation/en/](http://www.who.int/topics/ultraviolet_radiation/en/).

## Travel Medicine Clinic at Fort Myer



Are you planning on traveling internationally in the near future? If you are visiting a location in Africa, Asia, or Central/South America, an appointment at the travel medicine clinic can help you prepare for any disease risks you may encounter.

- The Family Health Center of Fort Myer (Rader Army Health Clinic) Travel Medicine Clinic is open on Tuesdays from 0900 to 1600.
- Appointments can be made by calling 703-696-3439.
- Schedule your appointment approximately 4-6 weeks prior to your departure date.
- Bring your medical records with you, including all prior vaccination records.

## Information Sources



Shoreland's Travel Health Online — [www.tripprep.com](http://www.tripprep.com)

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

- Traveler's Health Website — [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel)
- Travel Notice Website — [www.cdc.gov/travel/notices.aspx](http://www.cdc.gov/travel/notices.aspx)

U.S. Department of State

- Travel & Business Website — [www.state.gov/travelandbusiness](http://www.state.gov/travelandbusiness)
- Embassy & Consulate Website — [usembassy.state.gov](http://usembassy.state.gov)

World Health Organization Travel Website — [www.who.int/topics/travel/en](http://www.who.int/topics/travel/en)

International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers — [www.iamat.org](http://www.iamat.org)

International Society of Travel Medicine — [www.istm.org](http://www.istm.org)

American Society of Tropical Medicine & Hygiene — [www.astmh.org](http://www.astmh.org)

U.S. Army Public Health Command — <http://phc.amedd.army.mil>

*Tip: Check out these websites for more information about staying healthy while traveling abroad.*

## Fast Facts

- The vast majority of travel-related illnesses are preventable.
- You should visit the travel clinic 4-6 weeks before traveling to Africa, Asia, Central America, or South America.
- Vaccines are the safest, most effective means of preventing illness.
- Avoiding insect bites by using DEET-containing repellents is the only method of preventing some insect-borne diseases.
- One of the best ways to reduce the risk of illness while traveling is to wash your hands frequently.



## Healthy Travels

*Healthy Travels* is a quarterly publication written by the residents of the NCC-WRAIR General Preventive Medicine Residency.

The assertions contained herein are the personal views of the authors and are not to be construed as official. Although every effort is made to ensure statements are consistent with U.S. Army and COCOM disease control policies, the reader is referred to the appropriate headquarters' preventive medicine officer for definitive guidance and policy statements regarding official travel medicine requirements. Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited. Questions, comments and letters should be addressed to: Division of Preventive Medicine (MCMR-UWK), Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, ATTN: Residency Director, Silver Spring, MD 20910-7500

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