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# International travel and health

## Module 1: General health risks and considerations for travellers





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International travel and health. Module 1. General health risks and considerations for travellers (International travel and health)

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WHO cross border field simulation exercise – Kenya and United Republic of Tanzania – June 2019

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# Contents

Foreword	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Contributors	v
Declaration of interest	vii
<b>Module 1: General health risks and considerations for travellers</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Before travel</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Gather information on potential health risks during travel	1
1.2 Consult a travel clinic	1
1.3 Consult a specialist about underlying health conditions and special needs	2
1.4 Travel health insurance	3
1.5 Medical kit and toiletry items	4
1.6 Travellers with accompanying animals	4
<b>2. During travel</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. After travel</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4. Further information</b>	<b>7</b>

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## Foreword

Depending on the health profile of the traveller, the type of travel to be undertaken, and the places of transit and destination, travellers may face various health risks during travel. The *International travel and health* is an update of [International travel and health \(2012\)](#) and serves as an entry point for other World Health Organization (WHO) publications that provide further information. Its primary target audience is travel health practitioners and travel health professionals who provide health advice to travellers on appropriate precautions to be taken to minimize any travel-related health risks in unfamiliar environments, before, during and after travel. The guidance may also be helpful to health authorities who intend to support travel health professionals in their jurisdiction or develop travel health advice for their population. It may also be of interest to travellers who wish to obtain such information for themselves, as well as those working in the travel industry, such as agents and organizers, airlines and shipping companies.

Module 1: General health risks and considerations provides an overview of general points that are applicable to any international travel.

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## Declaration of interest

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Credit: WHO/Marta Soszynska  
On 9 March 2022, people rush to get on trains at the station in Lviv, Ukraine.

# Module 1: General health risks and considerations for travellers

Depending on the health profile of the traveller, the type of travel to be undertaken, and the places of transit and destination, travellers may encounter various health risks during travel. These include factors such as changes in temperature and humidity, air pollution, issues of safety and security, access to health and dental care services and products, exposure to infectious diseases, access to safe food and water, sanitation and hygiene standards, availability of facilities and equipment for disabled people, and local laws and customs.

All individuals planning travel should proactively seek information or advice regarding potential health risks. It is important for travellers to understand how best to avoid or minimize these risks, take appropriate preventive measures and exercise necessary precautions before, during and after travel.

## 1. Before travel

### 1.1 Gather information on potential health risks during travel

It is important to gather information about the potential health risks during travel at an early stage of travel planning and preparation. Travellers should also be aware of differences in local laws and customs, including those relating to substance use and sexual relationships.

### 1.2 Consult a travel clinic

Consultation should take place preferably 4–8 weeks before departure or earlier. However, it is still advisable to consult a travel clinic, even if it is very close to the departure date.

Depending on the place of origin, transit and/or destination of travel, the consultation may include the following:

- Vaccinations: many airborne diseases (pulmonary tuberculosis (TB), measles, varicella, diphtheria, influenza, mumps, meningitis, pertussis and severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and other infectious diseases (hepatitis A and B, rabies and yellow fever) are vaccine preventable. For some diseases, proof of vaccination may be required ([WHO, 2019](#)) (Box 1).
- Malaria prophylaxis medication and prevention ([WHO 2020](#)).
- Advice and preventive measures for any other mosquito-borne infections, such as dengue, chikungunya and Zika (see Module 2: Environmental health risks).
- Advice on water and food safety and oral rehydration salts (ORS) (See Module 2: Environmental health risks).

- Psychological assessment and advice from a specialist may be recommended if the traveller has a significant history of mental health conditions. (See Module 5: Mental, neurological and substance use conditions (MNS)).
- Necessary assessment, advice and medication for underlying health conditions for the entire duration of travel, taking into account possible delays or changes to the travel schedule.
- Dental examination if access to dental care could be limited at the destination.

### **Box 1.** Vaccination requirements and recommendations for international travellers, and malaria situation per country

This [Country List](#) is a compilation of key information to facilitate international travel. The information provided for each country includes vaccination requirements for international travellers as provided by States Parties to the International Health Regulations (2005) (IHR), as well as WHO recommendations for vaccination against yellow fever and poliomyelitis, and malaria prophylaxis.

The Country List is produced after consultation with States Parties to the IHR, and includes input from WHO technical units at headquarters, as well as from WHO regional offices. States Parties are consulted yearly to confirm or update their country's requirements for international travellers.

Country requirements are subject to change at any time. Temporary country requirements and WHO recommendations related to specific events are published on the [Travel advice page of WHO's website](#). However, it is important for travellers to ensure that they find out the requirements of the country to which they are travelling by checking with the relevant consulate or embassy.

## **1.3 Consult a specialist about underlying health conditions and special needs**

Additional considerations apply for certain groups of travellers, including:

- infants and young children;
- pregnant and breastfeeding women;
- older people;
- people with disabilities; and
- those who have underlying health conditions.

Such travellers are strongly recommended to seek specialist advice and/or information on access to the necessary care and facilities in the destination before travel. Due to possible travel restrictions and local laws, additional considerations may apply for travellers who are living with HIV and people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex.

Travellers with a chronic illness are advised to carry all necessary medications and medical items for at least the entire duration of the journey and to be prepared for unforeseen events, such as delay or change of travel schedule. They should consider carrying translations of any medical alerts or information on allergies.

- Travellers taking medicine should carry it in its original pharmacy packaging.

- Certain categories of prescription medicine or special medical items should be carried together **with a medical attestation:**
  - » on letterhead;
  - » signed by a physician;
  - » certifying that the traveller requires the medication or the items for a medical condition; and
  - » ideally in a language that is understood in the country of travel (Box 2).

### Box 2. Caution!!

In certain countries it is a criminal offence to carry certain prescription medication, in particular psychotropic medication (for example, benzodiazepines), without proof of prescription.

It is thus highly advisable that travellers carry:

- a letter from a physician certifying the need for medicine or other medical items, or both; as well as
- documents with details of their clinical conditions and treatment, such as copies of prescriptions.

All these documents should ideally be in a language that is understood in the country or countries of travel.

## 1.4 Travel health insurance

Travellers are strongly advised to obtain comprehensive travel insurance as a matter of routine and to declare any underlying health conditions to their travel insurers, because:

- Health care abroad may only be available from a private health provider and could be expensive.
- Travellers may need to be repatriated for better health care.
- In the event of death abroad, repatriation of the body can be extremely expensive and may be difficult to arrange.
- Proof of adequate health insurance may be required as a condition for entry to some countries.

Travellers are advised to:

- Seek information about possible reciprocal health care agreements between their country of residence and the destination country.
- Obtain comprehensive travel health insurance commensurate with the estimated risk and cost at the destination.

The travel health insurance may cover:

- changes to the itinerary;
- emergency evacuation for health reasons;
- medical care, including hospitalization;
- treatment for mental health problems; and

- repatriation of the body in case of death.

Other points to note regarding travel health insurance include:

- Travel health insurers may require proof of immunizations and/or malaria prophylaxis as a condition of their approval for treatment or repatriation.
- Travellers should be familiar with the procedures for obtaining assistance and reimbursement.
- A copy of the certificate of travel health insurance should always be kept at hand so that it can be presented, if requested, at any time during travel.

## 1.5 Medical kit and toiletry items

Sufficient medical supplies should be carried to meet foreseeable needs for the duration of the trip (Box 3). Toiletries should also be carried in sufficient quantity for the entire duration of the trip unless their availability at the travel destination is assured.

### Box 3. Basic medical kit may include but is not limited to:

- |                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| • adhesive tape                   | • anti-emetics and motion sickness medication                                  |
| • antiseptic wound cleanser       | • painkillers and antipyretics   |
| • bandages                        | • sterile dressing   |
| • scissors                        | • clinical thermometer   |
| • safety pins                     | • sunscreen and sunburn relief   |
| • emollient (lubricant) eye drops | • earplugs   |
| • insect repellent                | • tweezers   |
| • insect bite treatment           | • adhesive strips to close small wounds  |
| • antihistamine tablets           | • adequate supplies of condoms, contraception and/or other preventive measures |
| • nasal decongestant              | • oral rehydration salts and water treatment tablets.                          |
| • antidiarrhoeal medication       |  |

## 1.6 Travellers with accompanying animals

Travellers with accompanying animals should be aware that dogs (and, in some countries, cats) must be vaccinated against rabies in order to be allowed to cross international borders. A number of rabies-free countries have additional requirements. Before taking an animal abroad, the traveller should find out about the regulatory requirements of the countries of destination and transit.

## 2. During travel

- Always keep the following documents at hand ready to be presented, if requested, at any time during travel, together with a backup digital copy stored in secure email/cloud storage, in case originals are lost, damaged or stolen:
  - » vaccination record, if applicable;
  - » malaria prophylaxis record, if applicable;
  - » travel health insurance certificate or national health insurance card, as appropriate; and
  - » medical attestation to prescribed medicines, if applicable.
- Continue to take medications for chronic health conditions, if applicable.
- Avoid risk behaviours, such as:
  - » excessive alcohol use;
  - » recreational drug use;
  - » attending unsafe events or visiting other unsafe environments;
  - » approaching animals;
  - » engaging in unsafe sexual relationships (because of the risk of sexually transmitted infections) (Box 4);
  - » contravening local laws and customs.
- Be mindful of road safety:
  - » Wear seat belts or helmets as applicable.
  - » Driver sober.
  - » Avoid using phones while driving.
  - » Ensure the vehicle is in good repair.
  - » Respect the speed limit recommended on the road being used.
  - » Plan journeys to allow the driver to rest every 2 hours.
  - » Avoid driving in extreme weather conditions.
  - » Avoid driving on roads in poor repair or drive extra carefully at a reduced speed.
- Be mindful of food and water safety precautions (See Module 2: Environmental health risks).
- Be mindful of the need for protection from extreme weather, such as heat waves (See Module 2: Environmental health risks).

### 3. After travel

Travellers should seek medical attention on their return if they:

- experience illness on return or in the weeks following their return home, particularly if fever, persistent diarrhoea, vomiting, jaundice, urinary disorders, skin disease or anogenital infection occurs;
- received treatment for malaria while travelling;
- may have been exposed to an infectious disease, including sexually transmitted infections, while travelling whether or not they experience illness or symptoms; or
- experience deterioration of an underlying health condition (do not wait for regular consultation appointment).

Providing health personnel with information on travel history, including pre-travel vaccination and malaria prophylaxis taken, can be helpful.

#### **Box 4.** Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) – awareness for travellers

STIs are caused by various bacteria, viruses and parasites.

- Risks:
  - » Risk depends on individual behaviours.
  - » The risk is higher with unprotected sex or new partners.
  - » Some areas have antibiotic-resistant STIs.
  - » Complications of untreated STIs can be serious.
- Symptoms:
  - » Symptoms may be mild or unnoticed.
  - » Travellers should seek prompt medical attention if they are concerned.
- Prevention:
  - » Carry an adequate supply of condoms and/or other preventive measures.
  - » Consider vaccinations against human papillomavirus and hepatitis A and B.
  - » Avoid behaviours that increase STI risk.
  - » In case of sexual assault, seek immediate help.
- Testing and treatment:
  - » Travellers should see a health care professional if they are concerned about exposure or suspect an STI during or after travel.

## 4. Further information

- International travel and health: Chapter 6 Vaccine preventable diseases and vaccines (2019 update). Geneva: World Health Organization ([https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/travel-and-health/9789241580472-eng-chapter-6.pdf?sfvrsn=8c1a400c\\_14](https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/travel-and-health/9789241580472-eng-chapter-6.pdf?sfvrsn=8c1a400c_14)).
- International travel and health: Chapter 7 Malaria (2020 update). Geneva: World Health Organization (9789241580472-eng-chapter-7.pdf).
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### Road traffic injuries

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### Sexual health

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### Tuberculosis

- WHO TB knowledge-sharing platform. Geneva: World Health Organization (<https://extranet.who.int/tbknowledge>).





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