

# HEALTHCARE ISSUES ABROAD

Adjusting to life in a new country means excitement, challenge, and the unexpected. No amount of preparation can guarantee a trouble-free transition. Since you are not a citizen of the host country, you are not usually given the same medical care benefits as its citizens. Arranging and paying for medical care is your responsibility, and you should pay careful attention to the international coverage.

## BEFORE YOU LEAVE

Before you travel abroad, it is worthwhile to take a close look at the many factors that contribute to your physical and emotional well being. A trip abroad will almost certainly affect your health, because so many factors of your daily health have to do with lifestyle and environment. Conversely, the state of your health will have a significant impact on the success and enjoyment of your trip.

### 1. Assess Your Health & Health-related Practices

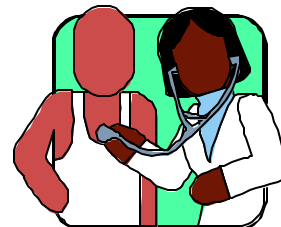
Going abroad is not a magic "geographic cure" for concerns and problems at home. Both physical and emotional health issues will follow you wherever you go. In particular, if you are concerned about your use of alcohol and other controlled drugs, or if you have an emotional health concern, you should address it honestly before making plans to travel. Contrary to many people's expectations, travel does not minimize these problems; in fact, it often exacerbates them to a crisis stage while you are away from home.

### 2. Identify Your Health Needs

Be clear about your health needs when applying for a program and when making housing arrangements. Thoroughly and honestly describe allergies, disabilities, psychological treatments, dietary requirements, and medical needs so that adequate arrangements can be made. In addition, resources and services for people with disabilities vary widely by country and region - if you have a disability or special need, identify it and understand ahead of time exactly what accommodations can and cannot be made.

#### Remember to ask questions, such as:

- What illnesses are endemic to the country?
- What medications should you take to prevent these illnesses?
- What precautions are recommended for sexual or health practices?
- What kind of insurance do you need, and how much coverage?
- What are the customs, beliefs, and laws in the host country concerning sexual behavior and the use of alcohol and drugs?
- What is the quality of water?
- What are the laws governing the import of medications, medical supplies, and contraceptives?



#### This information can be found in several places, including:

- Family physician
- Campus health service
- Local Public Health Department
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
- State Department Overseas Citizens Emergency Center
- Travelers with disabilities can get more information from Mobility International

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### 3. See Your Health Care Practitioners

A visit to your family physician, gynecologist, and dentist will insure that you are in good health before you leave and might prevent emergencies abroad. Update your health records, including eyeglass prescriptions and regular medications. If you are on prescription medication, check to be sure it is available in your host country as prescribed or, if not, carry a supply with you. If you self-inject prescribed medication, you may need to carry needles and syringes with you. You'll need a physician's prescription for medication and medical supplies you carry with you in order to pass through foreign customs.



Take copies of all medical records, prescriptions in generic form, and pertinent information; carry these with you in a safe place. If you expect to need regular medical care abroad, take a letter of introduction from your physician at home, providing details of your medical conditions, care, and specific needs. Try to identify medical resources before you leave.

### 4. Immunizations

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has an International Traveler's Hotline (404-332-4559) where, by punching in the country code of your host country, you can get recorded information on vaccinations, food and water and current health problems. Their Internet address is [www.cdc.gov/travel/travel.html](http://www.cdc.gov/travel/travel.html).

There are no *required* immunizations for most of Western Europe, Japan, Australia, and Mexico. Make sure your tetanus shot is current, and you should consider a vaccination for Hepatitis, which can be caused by contamination of food or water, by sewage, and by infected food handlers. If you are going to South America, Africa, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, Russia or remote areas of your host country, consult the CDC Traveler's Hotline before you depart. They may suggest vaccinations six months in advance.

### 5. Pack a Medical Kit

Travelling with a medical kit may be a helpful tool. Useful items to pack include: band-aids, sunscreen, anti-diarrhea medication, antibacterial ointment, and pain reliever. Also, depending on the region, you may want to include water purification tablets, salt tablets, skin moisturizers and insect repellent. Be sure to pack regular medications, contraceptives if you may need them, feminine hygiene products if you are traveling where they are not available, and any other routine health and medical products you think you may need or brands that you like. Check the expiration dates of all medications before you leave. Make sure to bring all prescription medicine with you as you may encounter trouble with customs if you try to have medicines sent once you are abroad.

## WHEN YOU ARRIVE

Once you arrive to a new country, you will soon discover that many elements in the environment may affect or alter your health. Most likely, you will be eating different foods, living in a different climate, and reacting emotionally in some way to this new experience.

### 1. Jet Lag

Depending on where you fly to, you may experience jet lag or traveler's stress. Some helpful ways to counteract jet lag include: getting plenty of rest, eating healthy food, drinking plenty of fluids (particularly juices and water), getting some moderate exercise and wearing loose, comfortable clothing.

### 2. Culture Shock and Stress

Culture shock is a typical phenomenon that happens to most travelers who venture to a new culture and country for an extended period of time. There are many emotional effects of facing new values, habits, and lifestyles. You may experience confusing emotional highs and lows during your time abroad. You may also feel impatient, bewildered and depressed at times. These are all initial symptoms of culture shock, and may easily be overcome. See Cultural Adjustment section for more information.

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Be aware that a moderate amount of anxiety and stress is a natural part of intercultural transitions. A new language, exotic foods, registration, beginning classes, and even changes in the weather can affect your stress level. This stress is nothing to be afraid of and can easily be dealt with by having a positive attitude and taking good care of yourself emotionally and physically.

### **3. Find Out About Available Resources in this New Country**

Learn how to get medical help, whether routine or emergency before the needs arises. Is there a 911 emergency number and, if so, what services does it access? Who will provide routine medical care, and how can you reach that provider? Ask the program director or the University what steps need to be taken in these situations.

### **4. Notify Proper Authority of Your Medical Needs**

If you require regular medical care for any condition you have, tell those in your host country who can be of assistance. Make sure to notify the program directors, the host family, or proper medical supervisors of your disabilities and special needs also.

### **5. Discover New Lifestyles**

Lifestyles in your host country may be different from those at home. Ask about safety issues such as local transportation, security issues of different neighborhoods, traffic patterns, and use of electrical appliances. Also, many of the experiences and practices you may take for granted in the United States may be perceived and accepted differently in your host country. Find out how this new culture views a) relationships, b) dating, c) leisure time, d) holidays, and e) other customs. An exciting world awaits you.

## **Concerns about AIDS and STDs**

You are undoubtedly aware of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Your risk of infection depends almost entirely on you own behavior. The only exceptions are the percentages of infected peoples may be higher or lower in other regions of the world, and if you have a medical emergency and require a blood transfusion. Other countries may have different levels of controls over blood collection than the United States.

## **Issues with Alcohol and drugs**

The use of alcohol is encouraged in some societies and prohibited in others. Many cultures teach young people to drink moderately and responsibly in the home, and thus do not experience the reactionary or "rebellious" alcohol abuse that some American students expose themselves to. In most cultures there are also methods for controlling alcohol abuse, but these vary and may not be obvious to a person unfamiliar with a particular culture.

The negative social and physical effects of the use of alcohol and other drugs are well documented. Use of these drugs may cause: blackouts, poisoning and overdose; physical and psychological dependence; damage to vital organs; inability to learn and remember information; and psychological problems including depression, psychosis and severe anxiety. Impaired judgment and coordination resulting from the use of alcohol and drugs are associated with acquaintance assault and rape; DUI/DWI arrests; hazing; falls, drowning and other injuries; contracting sexually-transmitted diseases including AIDS; and unwanted or unplanned sexual experiences and pregnancy.

The Maricopa Community Colleges District do not condone the illegal or otherwise irresponsible use of alcohol and other drugs. It is the responsibility of every program participant to know the risks associated with substance use and abuse. This responsibility obligates students and employees to know relevant District policies and federal, state and local laws and to conduct themselves in accordance with these laws and policies. While overseas, it is the responsibility of the student to know the relevant country and local laws concerning the possession, use, and abuse of drugs and alcohol.