

Health

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Africa certainly has an impressive selection of tropical diseases on offer, but you're much more likely to get a bout of diarrhoea, a cold or an infected mosquito bite than an exotic disease. As long as you stay up to date with your vaccinations and take some basic preventive measures, you'd have to be pretty unlucky to succumb to most of the health hazards covered in this chapter.

BEFORE YOU GO

H1N1

The H1N1 virus (commonly referred to as 'Swine Flu') was given a 'Phase 6' rating by the World Health Organization in June 2009. A 'Phase 6' alert means the virus is now considered a global pandemic. Like most countries, Zambia and Malawi have been affected. As of October 2009, the virus was widespread geographically but the number of cases were relatively low, as was the severity.

At press time, airport staff in some countries were screening arriving passengers for symptoms of the H1N1 flu. Check with the embassy of the country you're visiting to see if they have imposed any travel restrictions. It's best not to travel if you have flu-like symptoms of any sort.

For the latest information, check with the World Health Organization (www.who.int/en).

Before you go get a check-up at your dentist, and from your doctor if you have

any regular medication or chronic illness, eg high blood pressure or asthma. You should also organise spare contact lenses and glasses (and take your optical prescription with you); get a first aid and medical kit together; and arrange necessary vaccinations.

Many vaccines don't take effect until two weeks after you've been inoculated, so visit a doctor six to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received. This is mandatory for the African countries that require proof of yellow fever vaccination upon entry, but it's a good idea to carry it anyway, wherever you travel. Those heading off to very remote areas might like to do a first aid course (contact the Red Cross or St John's Ambulance).

Bring any medications in their original containers, clearly labelled, together with a signed and dated letter from your physician describing all medical conditions and medications.

INSURANCE

Find out whether your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or will reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures. It's vital to ensure that your travel insurance will cover the emergency transport required to get you to a hospital in a major city, to better medical facilities elsewhere in Africa, or all the way home, by air and with a medical attendant if necessary.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

The **World Health Organization** (www.who.int/en/) recommends that all travellers be covered for diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella and polio, as well as for hepatitis B, regardless of their destination.

The following vaccinations are recommended by the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (CDC; www.cdc.gov) for all parts of Africa: hepatitis A, hepatitis B, meningococcal meningitis, rabies and typhoid, and boosters for tetanus, diphtheria and measles.

Yellow fever is not necessarily recommended for all parts of Africa, although the certificate is an entry requirement for many countries (see p311).

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

It is a very good idea to carry a medical and first aid kit with you when travelling, to help yourself in the case of minor illness or injury. You should consider packing the following items:

- Antibiotics (prescription only), eg ciprofloxacin (Ciproxin) or norfloxacin (Utinor)
- Antidiarrhoeal drugs (eg loperamide)
- Acetaminophen (paracetamol) or aspirin
- Anti-inflammatory drugs (eg ibuprofen)
- Antihistamines (for hayfever and allergic reactions)
- Antibacterial ointment (eg Bactroban) for cuts and abrasions (prescription only)
- Antimalaria pills
- Steroid cream, such as hydrocortisone (for allergic rashes)
- Bandages, gauze, gauze rolls
- Adhesive or paper tape
- Scissors, safety pins, tweezers
- Thermometer
- Pocket knife
- DEET-containing insect repellent for the skin
- Permethrin-containing insect spray for clothing, tents, and bed nets
- Sun block
- Oral rehydration salts
- Iodine tablets (for water purification)
- Syringes and sterile needles
- Acetazolamide (Diamox) for altitude sickness (prescription only)
- Sterile needles, syringes and fluids if travelling to remote areas

If you are travelling through a malarial area – particularly an area where falciparum malaria predominates – consider taking a self-diagnostic kit that can identify malaria in the blood from a finger prick.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the internet. The WHO publishes a superb book called *International Travel and Health*, which is revised annually and is available online at no cost at www.who.int/ith/. Other websites of general interest are: MD Travel Health at www.mdtravelhealth.com, which provides

complete travel health recommendations for every country, updated daily (also at no cost); the CDC at www.cdc.gov; and Fit for Travel at www.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk, which has up-to-date information about outbreaks and is very user-friendly.

It's also a good idea to consult your government's travel health website before departure, if one is available.

IN AFRICA

AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

Health care in Africa is varied: it can be excellent in the major cities, which generally have well-trained doctors and nurses, but it is often patchy off the beaten track. Medicine and even sterile dressings and intravenous fluids might need to be purchased from a local pharmacy by patients or their relatives. The standard of dental care is equally variable, and there is an increased risk of hepatitis B and HIV transmission via poorly sterilised equipment. Generally, public hospitals in Africa offer the cheapest service, but will have the least up-to-date equipment and medications; mission hospitals often have more reasonable facilities; and private hospitals and clinics are more expensive but tend to have more advanced drugs and equipment and better trained medical staff.

It is strongly recommended that all drugs for chronic diseases be brought from home. Also, the availability and efficacy of condoms cannot be relied upon – bring all the contraception you'll need.

There is a high risk of contracting HIV from infected blood if you receive a transfusion in Africa. The **Blood Care Foundation** (www.bloodcare.org.uk) is a useful source of safe, screened blood, which can be transported to any part of the world within 24 hours.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

While not an exhaustive list, some precautions against these most common traveller ailments can go a long way.

Diphtheria

Diphtheria is spread through close respiratory contact. It usually causes a temperature and a severe sore throat. Sometimes a mem-