

Health Tips for Summer Vacationers: How to Avoid Getting Sick While Traveling

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While the colder months are more known as the time when contagious illnesses like the flu and norovirus are widespread, summer travel can lead to sickness if you're not careful! Thousands of people visit rest stops or take planes or trains for vacation- it takes just one infected person to turn these spots into breeding zones for pathogens (disease-causing germs). So what do you need to know about summer illnesses?



According to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), 22-64% of travelers to developing countries report travel-related health problems. Thankfully most illnesses are mild- but many of the infections travelers report only become apparent after their return home.

Whether you get sick at the beginning or end of a trip, or sometime in between, illness can put a damper on the entire experience.

Which Illnesses Should You Especially Watch out for?

Vector-Born Illnesses¹

West Nile Virus – Planning on visiting the Caribbean, East Africa, or Latin America? This virus can be transmitted through mosquito bites. Common symptoms include fever, fatigue, headache, nausea, or rashes, however, most people show no symptoms at all! It is important to seek medical attention if you have been bitten by mosquitos and think you could be infected. When traveling to countries with mosquito-borne illnesses, you can help avoid infection by applying insect repellent according to label directions, making sure where you're staying has window/door screens, sleeping under a bug net if provided, wearing long sleeves if possible, and following other precautions such as those outlined by the [Water Quality and Health Council](#). West Nile Virus was recently detected in [mosquitos in Wisconsin](#), so more U.S. detections are likely.

Other Mosquito-borne Illnesses – Mosquito-borne illnesses are common in a lot of travel destinations (including in the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa). [Malaria](#) is transmitted by

¹ Vector-borne illnesses are those illnesses that are spread by the bites of a “vector” such as a mosquito, tick, or flea (see [CDC website](#)).

mosquitos, but infected people often don't show symptoms for a week to a month. It initially induces flu-like symptoms, so be sure to talk to your doctor about getting anti-malarial medication before travelling to an area where the disease is common. Similarly, the [Zika Virus](#) does not have many symptoms, however it can lead to birth defects and pregnancy complications for expectant mothers who contract the virus. [Dengue Fever](#) is another mosquito-borne illness with symptoms including high fever and extreme headaches. While traveling in countries with these illnesses, the same procedures as above for mosquito-borne illnesses can reduce your risk of infection.

Fecal-Oral Diseases

Norovirus – Norovirus infections are notoriously common when groups of people are within close proximity of one another. Thus, it occurs often in confined spaces like cruise ships and more generally during the cooler months. Symptoms include low-grade fever, diarrhea, and forceful vomiting, but infections do not usually require medical attention. Make sure to wash your hands frequently with soap and water if norovirus is around as hand sanitizer isn't always effective. If someone close to you gets norovirus, be sure to *clean* as well as *disinfect* all common area surfaces with a freshly prepared solution of ¾ cup bleach to one gallon of water, and keep the solution in contact with the surface for five minutes.

Travelers' Diarrhea – If you are planning on visiting developing countries in Latin America, South America, Asia, or Africa, especially with infants or elderly persons, take steps to prevent travelers' diarrhea. Affected persons experience bloating, nausea, and dehydration, which in extreme cases can lead to death if not treated properly with antibiotics. Travelers' diarrhea can result from drinking contaminated water (or water that you're not accustomed to), so always check to see if the tap water [where you are going](#) is safe to drink. If not, or in doubt, disinfect water before drinking (camping supply stores sell appropriate products) or purchase commercially bottled water.

Tips on How to Stay Healthy this Summer

For the Pool:

- Make sure to shower before entering the pool and strongly encourage (if not insist!) children do so as well. This reduces the risk of pathogens entering the pool and allows chlorine in the water to do its job.
- Always be wary of unfamiliar pools! Clues such as filters not working, pool tile walls that feel slimy, and water that isn't clear are signs that the pool may be unsafe for swimming. Bring a simple [pool test kit](#) along with you to test the water for appropriate pH and chlorine level.
- If you are sick or have diarrhea, don't swim in the pool! In fact, wait at least two weeks after you've had diarrhea to swim in the pool to avoid spreading the infection.

For Travel Abroad:

- Check with your doctor well in advance to see if there are any vaccinations you need based on the areas you're traveling to. Also check the [U.S. State Department website](#) to see if there are any outbreaks in the countries to which you are heading.

For RV Travel:

- Make sure you're disposing of waste properly! Waste should be disposed of frequently (from once a week to every other day, depending on your family) and should be done with gloves and at a clearly marked waste dumping station. Be sure you know and use the [proper procedure](#) for your RV.
- Only refill your freshwater tank with a white [potable water](#) hose. Pay careful attention to the tank during extremely hot or cold weather. If the tank starts to smell offensive, disinfect with a bleach solution as it may have become contaminated. Put ¼ cup bleach in the tank for every 15 gallons of water, turn the pump on, and run all faucets until the water running from the faucets smells of bleach. Close the faucets and allow the system to sit for 12 hours, then drain the entire system and refill the fresh water tank with potable water. Run all faucets again until the smell of bleach is gone.

For Public Restrooms and Hotels:

- Public restrooms may be havens for pathogens! Toilet flushing (especially highly pressurized ones) can release pathogens into the air in a water spray, so make sure to close the lid *before* flushing, if there is one. Also, using paper towels to dry your hands spreads [fewer pathogens](#) than electric hand dryers or even “air-drying.”
- Be sure to wash your hands (if possible) or use hand sanitizer frequently when on an airplane, train, rest stop, or any other highly-visited area. Because some pathogens can survive on multiple surfaces for over 24 hours, to be extra careful, bring along disinfectant wipes to treat surfaces around you.
- Pay attention to surfaces and objects that may not be routinely cleaned in hotel rooms! Items like the TV remote, microwave buttons, light switches, and non-disposable glassware might not be cleaned between hotel guests. Check for [bed bugs](#) by pulling back the sheets and mattress covers and looking for dark brown or black spots in one or two corners of the bed.
- If you are concerned about diseases in the area where you're traveling, the [CDC reports](#) that staying at a hotel rather than camping puts you at a lower risk for certain diseases like West Nile Virus or tetanus.

Whether you're going abroad or traveling in an RV, make sure you have plans to avoid getting sick while traveling *and* a plan for if you do get sick. Whatever your plans are, remember to put your health first and have a great summer!

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