

Medical kits for travellers

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Key words

Medical kits, travel medicine, tourism

Abstract

As health problems are so common in travellers, and reliable medical facilities are often unavailable in less developed countries, travel medicine specialists advocate the use of personal medical kits. These kits are designed to allow the traveller to self-treat common minor conditions when they are in the not uncommon situation of having no access to reliable medical care. Another concern in less developed countries is the proliferation of fake or substandard medications.

Millions of people each year leave their homes to travel, many of them to less developed areas of the world. Multiple studies have shown an illness rate of 50% for travellers on a short trip to less developed countries. It is clear that with such a high rate of illness abroad, traveller's medical kits are an important aspect of pre-travel preparation. In many less developed countries it is difficult, if not impossible, to

access reliable medical care. This is particularly true if one is in a remote location undertaking adventure activities such as trekking, rafting, diving, etc.

Additionally, there is a thriving trade in both fake and substandard medications in many parts of the developing world. The World Health Organization estimates that 15%

of the world's drugs are substandard. Several recent studies show the problem is widespread. In an examination of one of the newer malaria treatments, Artesunate, samples from a number of countries in South East Asia were analysed and it was found that 38% of samples had no active ingredient.¹ A 1999 study of 242 Cambodian pharmacies found that 71% sold fake Artesunate and 60% sold fake Mefloquine.² In Nigeria, 48% of samples of 27 different drugs were found to be substandard.³

Travellers' medical kits should be designed to provide medications and instructions for the treatment of the most common conditions to be expected for that individual-based on their activities, season, duration and style of travel, access to reliable medical care and past medical history. A kit for a one-week stay in a diving resort in Thailand will be vastly different from that prepared for a group of six trekking through a remote area of the Indian Himalaya for one month, or a group of white-water kayakers in Costa Rica.

Table 1 shows medications that may be included in a medical kit for travel to a remote area in a less developed country. For a shorter trip to a less remote area, a medical kit is more likely to focus on the two most common health problems in travellers: diarrhoea and respiratory infections. Environmental ailments such as altitude sickness are an increasing problem as access to previously remote areas of the world opens up to more and more people.⁴

Travellers should be aware that the majority of ailments they may experience overseas cannot be prevented by

vaccination. They should understand the behavioral adjustments they should make, but they should also understand the limitations of such methods of prevention, not to mention the problems with compliance. For this reason, all travellers should have a medical kit to take with them, prepared by their personal doctor or a travel medicine specialist. The extent of this kit will depend upon the individual characteristics of the traveller and their trip.

References

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TABLE 1
MEDICATIONS FOR PERSONAL MEDICAL KIT SUGGESTIONS
(ordinary first aid and anti-malarials not included)

CIRCUMSTANCES	MEDICATIONS RECOMMENDED
Gastrointestinal	Gastrolyte, Loperamide, Buscopan, Prochlorperazine, Coloxyl, Mylanta, Norfloxacin (or Ciprofloxacin or Azithromycin or Cotrimoxazole), Tinidazole
Respiratory	Paracetamol, Ibuprofen, Pseudoephedrine or decongestant nasal spray, Promethazine, Roxithromycin (or Amoxicillin/Clavulanate), throat lozenges
Skin	Steroid cream, Cephalexin, Betadine
Female	Diflucan, BHCG test kit, Postinor, Ural
Environmental	Sunscreen, DEET-containing insect repellent, condoms
Altitude	Acetazolamide
Climbing	Nifedipine, Dexamethasone, Codeine, Rectinol
Diving/surfing	Doxycycline, Ciprofloxacin, Bactroban, Soframycin drops, Pseudoephedrine or decongestant nasal spray, anti-motion sickness agent, normal saline for irrigation, wound irrigation syringe