

Travel Health Tips

With a little knowledge and common sense you can prevent the health and safety problems that could spoil a great vacation. Only a small percentage of travelers experience these problems; we don't want you among them. Again we offer our mothers' admonition, "Forewarned is forearmed!" We are not doctors, but this accumulated wisdom that we've compiled from various sources and our own experience may be helpful.

Alcohol, in any form, could slow your reflexes as you drive. *Prevention:* drink in moderation and drive with care, or appoint a designated driver.

Altitude sickness, also known as acute mountain sickness, is caused by decreasing atmospheric pressure. That is, the higher you go in the mountains, the harder your heart, lungs, and body tissues must work to draw in oxygen. Symptoms include: a hammering headache, nausea, dizziness, fatigue, rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, sleeplessness and loss of appetite.

Prevention: fast-walk, every day for 30 minutes, two to three weeks before you leave home. It's possible that you may experience one or more of the symptoms when you travel at higher elevations. If you do feel ill, especially if you have heart or nervous system problems, stop immediately and descend more than 1,000 feet to a lower altitude. If your symptoms are mild, drink lots of water, rest awhile to give your body a chance to adapt, take the headache medicine that's in your first aid kit, avoid alcohol and cigarettes, and eat lightly and frequently.

Cardiac patients should consult with their doctors prior to the trip, and proceed with special caution in the mountains.

Dehydration, as you know, is excessive loss of water from the body tissues, which can cause fever, diarrhea, vomiting and acidosis. It can sneak up on you in the Western U.S., because the dry climate is so comfortable and water evaporates from the body more quickly. *Prevention:* increase your fluid intake (not alcohol), even when you don't feel thirsty.

Giardia, unlike dehydration, is something you may not have heard about. It's a microscopic organism found in lakes and streams which can cause diarrhea, cramps, bloating and weight loss. *Prevention:* don't drink the water in any crystal-clear stream or lake—unless it's been boiled for at least five minutes or you use a water filter system that eliminates giardia.

Hypothermia is the lowering of the core body temperature to below 95 degrees F/35 degrees C, usually caused by prolonged exposure to cold and

characterized by drowsiness, loss of judgment or coordination, slurred speech, uncontrolled shivering, cool and pale skin, and slowed pulse and breathing. *Prevention:* avoid prolonged exposure to cold; put on extra layers of clothing and the jacket, heavy sweater or sweatshirt you brought along—before you feel cold.

Sore leg muscles are a distinct possibility if you do any hiking. *Prevention:* start a conditioning regimen two or three weeks before your trip; fast-walk 30 minutes or more every day, if your physical condition permits.

Sunburn is another familiar vacation spoiler. *Prevention:* wear a wide-brim hat, apply sunscreen and wear long sleeves and pants. And don't forget to wear those sunglasses! Potentially harmful ultra-violet rays are particularly strong at high elevations.

Ticks are abundant in early spring and summer throughout much of the American West. Some of them carry diseases such as Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Tularemia and Lyme's disease. *Prevention:* when hiking or walking through undergrowth, tuck your pant legs into your socks, treat clothing with insect repellent, and check daily for ticks. To remove an embedded tick, pull it out gently with tweezers, removing all head and neck parts to prevent infection.

Wildlife, especially bear, deer, and bighorn sheep in the mountains, are dangerous. *Prevention:* Keep a safe distance at all times. Do not feed them; doing so is not "a safe distance," and feeding them may make them aggressive. Also photograph all wildlife from a safe distance.

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