

facts about...

TRAVELLERS' DIARRHOEA

TRAVELLERS' DIARRHOEA

Travellers' diarrhoea

Pack a contingency plan to help you deal with unexpected travel bugs.

Travellers' diarrhoea is a common and uncomfortable problem for travellers which can upset your otherwise well planned holiday. It is caused by eating or drinking food or water that has been contaminated with bugs that cause diarrhoea. The illness usually lasts a couple of days and you know you have it when you have to rush to the toilet with watery diarrhoea.

Plan to avoid travellers' diarrhoea

There are steps you can take to follow which minimise the risk of diarrhoea:

- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap before eating or handling food and after using the toilet.
- Never drink tap water unless it is boiled or purified first
- Keep to bottled water – or other pre-packaged drinks e.g. bottles or cans of soft drink – and hot drinks such as tea and coffee. Sometimes the jugs of water provided (and regularly refilled) by the more up-market hotels will be suitable.
- Always peel fruit (or wash it thoroughly in purified water).
- Choose restaurants where the staff, surroundings and food appear clean.

- Choose restaurants where there are plenty of people eating, as news of a source of illness usually results in less patronage.
- Remember to brush your teeth using purified or bottled water.
- Ask for lukewarm food to be replaced with fresh, hot food.
- Refuse ice in drinks.
- Avoid salads.
- Never eat raw seafood.

Unfortunately, in certain high-risk locations, even when you follow the strictest preventative measures, it is not possible to avoid travellers' diarrhoea.

Medical prevention of travellers' diarrhoea

Effective vaccines are available for some of the causes of diarrhoea including hepatitis A and typhoid. Cholera vaccine is not pleasant, nor very effective, and is not recommended by the World Health Organisation. Before you travel overseas, your doctor can give you advice about which vaccines are appropriate for your destination.

Antibiotics are only effective against bacterial diarrhoea after its onset.

Some travellers you meet may be taking antibiotics or other medications to try to prevent diarrhoea. Antibiotics are not effective in preventing diarrhoea. They are not



recommended because of the risk of side effects. Rashes and stomach upsets are often caused by these medications.

The best way of avoiding sickness is to carefully follow the simple guidelines of hygiene listed in this brochure.

ALWAYS WASH YOUR HANDS
THOROUGHLY
with soap before eating or handling food
and after using the toilet.

Special precautions

For some travellers who have a very high risk of acquiring diarrhoea and for those who face serious consequences if they get it, antibiotics, taken as a preventative, may be of some benefit. If you think you fit into this category, you should seek advice from your doctor before going overseas.

Children and people who are immunosuppressed or who have other medical conditions may be more prone to certain illnesses and should seek special advice from their doctor before travel.

Purifying your water while you travel

When we turn on the tap in most places in Australia we expect to be able to safely drink the water direct from the tap. In many developing countries this is not the case. Water straight from the tap is not safe to drink and must be purified (disinfected) before you drink it.

Techniques

First, collect some water from a stream or a tap. Then select a purification technique which best suits your situation. Safe purification of water takes time, so you will need to be patient!

Boiling: You must boil water for a minimum of 10 minutes. This is the only absolutely safe method to disinfect water. Of course, you need a method of heating the water and this is not always possible.

Chemical disinfection of water: Suitable chemicals include iodine solution and tablets and chlorine. Most pharmacies, hiking equipment stores and medical clinics sell the formulas.

The most effective method of chemically disinfecting water is to add 5 drops of 2% iodine to a litre of water and let it stand for at least 30 minutes. Before drinking the water, it is recommended that you add vitamin C (ascorbic acid) to the solution in the ratio of 50 milligrams per litre of water and stir the liquid.

This will improve the taste and smell of the water. The vitamin C reduces the flavour of the iodine. Although iodine kills most germs that cause travellers' diarrhoea, it does not kill them all.

Boiling the water for a minimum of 10 minutes is the only really effective method of disinfecting water.

If you have an allergy to iodine or have thyroid problems, Tetraglycine Hydroperoxide tablets, available from most pharmacies and sports stores, are recommended. They should be used strictly according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Filters: Potable water filters are not completely effective in making water safe, but a good quality filter is recommended where boiling is not possible. Filtered water should also be chemically treated before it is safe to drink.

Treating diarrhoea while you're travelling
So you have got Bali belly, Montezuma's revenge, Tourista, Delhi belly, the Jamaican Runs... usually, you will require no specific treatment. You will have up to five loose, watery bowel actions in the first day. You may experience a mild stomach cramping pain, a low grade fever and nausea and vomiting. Things should look better after 24 – 48 hours and the illness should have completely resolved by day four or five. Antibiotics will help get you better, faster, but there may be some side effects.

It is important to make the following allowances for your illness:

- The most important thing to remember during this time is that you drink plenty of fluids. In milder cases (3 or less bowel



actions each day), most drinks will be fine, e.g. pure water, mineral water, black tea or fruit juice. For more severe cases and for children and the elderly, oral re-hydration solutions are the best. Re-hydration solutions replace lost fluids and salts. Be sure to use purified water when you make your own solutions.

- Rest
- If you have to get on that bus, plane or tour, and you have a mild illness (1-2 loose bowel actions), or if you have been unwell more than 24 hours, then take anti-diarrhoeal drugs. Suitable drugs are Lomotil™ or Imodium™. Do not use these drugs for longer than 48 hours.

Caution: Never take anti-diarrhoeals if there is blood in the stools, severe abdominal pain, or a high fever (i.e. temperature of more than 38°C). Anti-diarrhoeal drugs must not be given to children. In these situations, you should try to see a doctor. If there is no doctor available take antibiotics.

Oral re-hydration solutions

Proprietary re-hydration solutions such as Gastrolyte™ or Hydralyte™ readily available in most countries.

Make your own solution –

Stir 1/2 teaspoon sodium bicarbonate, 1/2 teaspoon salt, 2 tablespoons honey (or 4 tablespoons of sugar) into a glass of fruit juice. Combine with 1 litre of pure water.

Even more simple –

Mix 1 part of fruit juice with 4 parts of pure water.

- You may need antibiotics if you have three or more bowel actions with nausea, vomiting, cramps or fever. Stop the antibiotics after one day if you are better. Otherwise continue for three days.
- Take drugs to stop nausea. Metoclopramide (Maxolon™) or prochlorperazine (Stemetil™) are satisfactory. These must not be given to children.
- Remember that if you are on the contraceptive pill then both the illness and any antibiotics you take, may result in the pills being ineffective on the days on which you were ill. To be on the safe side, you should continue to take the pill but use other means of contraception according to the manufacturers' instructions on the packet insert.

When to consult a doctor

When you are experiencing blood in the diarrhoea, severe abdominal pain or high fever (i.e. your temperature is above 38°C) consult a doctor. Do NOT take anti-diarrhoeal drugs (such as Lomotil™ or Imodium™).

If you are in a cholera area and you develop watery diarrhoea, go to a hospital or a doctor. On the journey to see the doctor, take Doxycycline tablets.

Persistent loose diarrhoea may indicate you have giardia. Bloody diarrhoea which lasts longer than five days may indicate you have an amoeba infection. In both these instances, you should see a doctor.

Checklist for treating diarrhoea while you are travelling:

If you're unlucky enough to get diarrhoea while you are travelling, you may find it helpful to fill in this checklist. Write in any information which helps you deal with the symptoms of travellers' diarrhoea. For a fuller explanation of any points read this brochure.

- ✓ 1. Drink plenty of fluids. Suggested oral re-hydration method:
- ✓ 2. Rest
- ✓ 3. Take anti-diarrhoeal drugs for mild illness. Do not take these if there is blood in your diarrhoea, if you have abdominal pain or if you have a fever i.e. your temperature is greater than 38°C.
Your doctor has prescribed:
- ✓ 4. Organise to see a doctor if you have blood in the diarrhoea, severe abdominal pain, high fever (i.e. your temperature is above 38°C) or persistent loose stools after five days OR if you have any other concerns. The contact details for the nearest doctor are:
- ✓ 5. You may need antibiotics if you have 3 or more bowel actions with one of nausea, vomiting, cramps or fever.
Your doctor has prescribed:
- ✓ 6. Take drugs to stop nausea – not to be given to children.
Your doctor has prescribed:

Sometimes diarrhoea will continue after you return home. In this case, you should see your doctor who will organise tests to find the cause and give you the best treatment. Remember to tell your doctor that you have recently been overseas!

This information booklet has been designed by the Digestive Health Foundation as an aid to people who have diarrhoea or for those who wish to know more about it. This is not meant to replace personal advice from your medical practitioner.

The Digestive Health Foundation (DHF) is an educational body committed to promoting better health for all Australians by promoting education and community health programs related to the digestive system.

The DHF is the educational arm of the Gastroenterological Society of Australia, the professional body representing the Specialty of gastrointestinal and liver disease in Australia. Members of the Society are drawn from physicians, surgeons, scientists and other medical specialties with an interest in GI disorders.

Since its establishment in 1990 the DHF has been involved in the development of programs to improve community awareness and the understanding of digestive diseases.

Research and education into gastrointestinal disease are essential to contain the effects of these disorders on all Australians.

Further information on a wide variety of gastrointestinal conditions is available on our website.



Digestive Health Foundation
c/-GESA
145 Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
Australia

Phone (02) 9256 5454
Fax (02) 9241 4586
dhf@gesa.org.au
<http://www.gesa.org.au>

This brochure is promoted as a public service by the Digestive Health Foundation. This leaflet cannot be completely comprehensive and is intended as a guide only. The information given here is current at the time of printing, but may change in the future.

If you have further questions you should raise them with your own doctor.

© Copyright.
Digestive Health Foundation,
updated April 2003.