

How to prevent and treat Diarrhea while you are traveling

Why might I get diarrhea while I am traveling?

There are many infections people can get while traveling that cause diarrhea. Many of these infections do not affect the people living in the areas that you are traveling since they may have had them before (and are immune). People also get diarrhea while traveling from the stress of traveling and changing their diet.

If I am visiting a country I grew up in am I protected from getting diarrhea?

No. There are some infections you may have had as a child that you will not get again even if you are exposed to them. However, most of the infections that cause diarrhea do not produce long-term protection—so you can get them again when you visit.

How do I know if my diarrhea is from infection or from other reasons?

It can be difficult to tell the difference. If you are having just two or three loose stools a day and no other symptoms, your diarrhea is more likely not caused by an infection. If you are having many watery stools it is likely caused by infection. Having other symptoms with the diarrhea such as blood in the stool, fever, stomach pain, or nausea make infection very likely.

How do I avoid getting diarrhea?

The most important and easy thing to do to prevent diarrhea is frequent hand washing. This is especially important before eating meals, but the more often you wash your hands the better. Since soap and water are not always available, the alcohol-based hand sanitizers are very convenient (and work very well). You can buy these at any pharmacy, grocery, or convenience store in the United States--take them along with you. If you don't know how to find these ask your doctor or nurse.

Certain foods are more likely to be safe. Any food or drink that is very hot when it is served is safe. Breads and sweets are considered safe. Foods that are more likely to make you sick are uncooked vegetables, salads, and any raw or undercooked seafood, meats or fish. If you wash your hands and use a clean knife to peel and cut fruit it is usually safe. Avoid fruits that do not have a peeling, such as berries. Dairy products, such as milk and cheese are not safe unless they are treated (such as pasteurizing). You can make your raw milk safe by heating it until it starts to boil and letting it cool down. Boxed milk (irradiated milk) is safe to drink.

Water can make you ill as well. Like milk, if you boil your water that will make it safe to drink. Bottled water is also usually safe. Bottled, carbonated beverages (ones with bubbles such as soda) are safe to drink. Carbonation kills germs over a four hour period, so carbonating it at the "tap" does not make it safe if the water mixed in was contaminated. You should avoid ice cubes, unless made with safe water and should brush teeth with safe water.

It may help you to more gracefully avoid certain foods if you tell your host that your doctor told you not to eat certain foods because "your stomach is not used to" these foods anymore.

What do I do if I get diarrhea?

There are two types of medicine for diarrhea in travelers. First, there are medicines that slow down the diarrhea but don't treat the infection causing it. These medicines help decrease the symptoms. The most commonly used are loperamide ("Imodium") and Bismuth subsalicylate ("Pepto-bismol"), which are both available without a prescription at any pharmacy. These should not be used in young children.

Also, there are antibiotics to cure the infection. These which decrease the number of days you are sick.

When diarrhea is very minor (two or three loose stools a day) it is probably not infectious and using either loperamide or Bismuth subsalicylate to help with the symptoms is usually enough. The doses and directions are below.

When you have lots of watery stools you should use the antibiotic that your doctor or nurse will give you to take on your trip. You can also use the loperamide and Bismuth subsalicylate for symptoms until the antibiotic works. If you are severely ill, have fever or have blood in the stool you should only use the antibiotic and NOT the loperamide or Bismuth subsalicylate.

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Things to remember while you Travel (Carry with your travel documents)

Don't Get Diarrhea.

WASH HANDS, you cannot wash them enough, especially before eating (substitute alcohol based hand sanitizers like Purell or Aavanguard if more convenient).

Foods to avoid: Raw or undercooked meats, seafood, and fish; untreated milk or cheese; lettuce and raw vegetables. Fruits should be prepared in a clean manner.

Water and milk can be made safe to drink by bringing to a boil and letting cool down. Commercially bottle drinks are usually safe.

If you have one or two loose stools a day use only medicines to help with symptoms, if lots of watery stools, especially with blood in the stools, pain, or fever, take an antibiotic.

MEDICATIONS For diarrhea

To help with symptoms:

loperamide (“Imodium”)

Directions: Take two tablets to start, then take one pill after each stool (do not take more than 8 in 24 hours). Don't use this medicine in babies, young children or when you are pregnant.

Bismuth subsalicylate (“Pepto-bismol”)

Directions: If using tablets take two tablets every 30 minutes until diarrhea decreases. Do not take more than 16 tablets in 24 hours. If taking liquid, take 6 teaspoons (30 mls) every 30 minutes until diarrhea decreases. Do not take more than 8 times during 24 hours. Do not use in babies and young children.

To treat an infection:

Antibiotic: Your doctor or nurse will give you an antibiotic to take with you that you can take if you get bad diarrhea. Make sure you understand how to use this before leaving the office. The names of some common antibiotics are Azithromycin (Zithromax), Ciprofloxacin, Levofloxacin (Levoquin), and Rifaxamin.