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Don't Leave Home Without It

BEFORE YOU PACK YOUR BAGS, TAKE THESE 4 STEPS TO MAKE SURE YOUR TRIP IS A HEALTHFUL ONE

By Joyce Wiswell

Planning the trip of your dreams? Can't wait to unwind? Then the last thing you need is to have medical matters interrupt your well-deserved rest and relaxation. From travel insurance to preventative vaccinations, there's a lot more to consider than how many bathing suits to pack and how much spending money to bring. Here are four things you should add to your "bon voyage" checklist, so when it comes time to relax, you'll be able to do just that.

Get familiar with your destination

The exotic nature that makes a destination so enticing also can cause health problems. How safe is the water? Do you need to take anti-malaria drugs? Is yellow fever an issue? (The answer is yes, if you're traveling to certain parts of Africa and South America.)

If you're traveling out of the country, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site at www.cdc.gov for information. Or try a local travel clinic. For \$20, the Visiting Nurse Association (VNA) TravelWise clinic in Oak Park offers the information travelers need to know about their destination, and, for an extra fee, gives required vaccinations.

"It's well worth the investment. You're spending a lot of money, and when you get to your destination, you don't want to be sick," says registered nurse Kay Renny, VNA'S manager of community programs. "It's especially worthwhile if you travel regularly, since many vaccines are good for many years."

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A travel clinic can provide tips on things you might not have considered, such as staying out of parasite-plagued rivers and lakes or avoiding animals in areas where rabies is prevalent.

Get insured

“Most people think that travel insurance should only be purchased if you are older and in poor health,” says Mary Bergsman, certified travel counselor and travel sales support specialist with AAA Michigan.

Bergsman recommends such policies for everyone, saying she recalls a 30-something client who skipped the insurance and had to be airlifted off a cruise ship after injuring his knee.

Find out if your health insurance covers foreign travel, and what exactly is covered. Keep in mind that if a medical issue does occur, you'll have to shell out costs and wait for reimbursement.

“There have been times when our members have had to be medically evacuated from the country they are in to a hospital with more modern facilities,” Bergsman says. “The evacuation alone can cost more than \$8,000 that must be paid up front.”

Travel insurance also can cover your trip if you need to cancel at the last minute because of a chronic condition, such as high blood pressure – and cover the cost if you need to rush home for a family medical emergency.

AAA policies start at \$23 and include medical coverage, trip interruption and trip delay. The insurance covers up to 30 days and is an additional \$4 per person per day after that.

Prepare your prescriptions

It's tempting to throw all your pills together in a small vial to save space. Resist doing so, says John Khoury, registered pharmacist and manager of the outpatient pharmacy at Botsford Hospital in Farmington Hills.

“Different pills should not touch each other. They can cross contaminate and even disintegrate,” he says. “And drugs without labels can be a red flag at customs.”

Each prescription should be in its own bottle with its own label. Ask your pharmacist for the smallest possible bottle. Make sure your prescription will last the length of the trip, and bring enough for a few extra days just in case.

Keep medication away from places inside cars that can become overheated, such as near windows, or in the trunk or glove compartment. Purchase a mini ice pack for medications that need refrigeration, such as insulin.

If you're flying, keep your prescriptions in your carry-on bag. For the most up-to-date security rules on prescription liquid medication, call the airline prior to travel or visit the Transportation Security Administration's Web site at www.tsa.gov.

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Get your body ready

You only have so much time on vacation, and you certainly don't want to waste a minute of it on jet lag. Start by adjusting your inner clock a week before departure by matching your sleep patterns to your destination.

When you board the plane, change your watch to your arrival time zone. If it's nighttime where you're heading, sleep on the plane, but stay awake if it's daytime. Avoid alcohol and caffeine, and drink plenty of water and juice.

"When you arrive, try to get your body in sync with the present," the VNA's Renny advises. "Get up first thing in the morning, even if it's 4 a.m. at home. Being exposed to the sun will help put you on their time. Then take a rest, and go back out in the afternoon."

Keep moving on long trips, which increase the risk for deep vein thrombosis (DVT), a blood clot that usually forms in the legs and can be fatal. To prevent DVT, don't go too long without moving your legs. Flex and point your toes every 20 minutes, and if you're on a plane, train or bus, walk up and down the aisle each hour. If you're traveling by car, stop at rest areas to get out and walk. For flights longer than eight hours, consider wearing compression stockings, which are available at Binson's Home Health Care Centers, and Wright & Filippis, as well as area drugstores.



*Registered nurse Kay Renny assists those traveling out of the country by finding pertinent information about their destinations and providing required vaccinations at the Visiting Nurse Association's TravelWise clinic in Oak Park.
Photo by Daniel Lippitt*

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