

Travel tips for women

All travellers should plan carefully to ensure their health and safety while away. However, women have a few extra concerns.

Be culturally sensitive to dress codes

Many countries have different ideas about how women should dress and behave. People will make assumptions about you based on what you are wearing. Even if you don't agree with particular customs, it will make your trip more enjoyable if you respect local expectations. If you don't, you may have to endure unpleasant attention. Some general suggestions include:

- Dress conservatively. Men in certain cultures will judge your sexual availability by your style of clothing.
- Certain Islamic countries require women to cover their hair, arms and legs. Flouting this regulation in some countries may get you arrested.
- Many Buddhist temples in South East Asia require visitors to wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts as a sign of respect.
- Visitors to Buddhist temples and Muslim mosques must be barefoot.
- Some tourists at beachside cities feel that wearing bathers around the streets is appropriate, even when the locals are wearing business suits. Take notice of the dress codes.

Travelling by yourself

In some countries, men may consider a woman travelling alone as an easy sexual target. You may experience unwelcome catcalls, obscenities and pinches. Suggestions include:

- Ignore the attention as best you can.
- Leave the situation if possible.
- Go to the nearest police station if you are concerned.
- Err on the side of caution. A man with a different cultural upbringing may misinterpret what you consider an innocent conversation to be a sexual come-on.
- Agreeing to go somewhere alone with a man may be considered, in some cultures, as agreeing to sex.

Security suggestions

General safety suggestions include:

- Try to travel during daylight hours.
- Never hitchhike.
- Don't wear expensive jewellery on obvious display.
- Remember that handbags, clutch purses and bum bags can be easily stolen.
- Wear valuables (such as travellers cheques and credit cards) on a belt worn under the clothes and next to the skin.
- Consider carrying a 'dummy' wallet holding a small amount of cash. If you are directly confronted by a mugger, you can hand over the dummy wallet and avoid further distress.
- Choose train compartments that have a few people in them. Being alone in an empty carriage could make you vulnerable.
- Carry with you at all times the contact details of the Australian embassy. If the city doesn't have an Australian embassy, find out which other country's embassy is available to help you, such as the British embassy.
- If you are feeling particularly nervous in an unfamiliar city, notify your hotel manager of where you are going for the day, including details on when they should expect you back. If you don't return to the hotel on time, the manager can call the police.

Health concerns

Suggestions include:

- Some medications that are legal in Australia may be prohibited overseas. Contact the Australian embassies in the countries you intend visiting to check.
- Take enough regular medication with you to last the entire trip. Some drugs may not be available overseas.
- Some women prefer to take their own supply of tampons and pads when they travel. These items can be difficult to find or very expensive in developing nations.
- Avoid activities that could infect you with a blood-borne disease - for example, dental work, tattooing or ear piercing.
- Travel, particularly to different time zones, can play havoc with menstrual cycles. Expect irregular bleeding and plan for it.
- In your travel medical kit, pack products to help you self-treat common travelling ailments, such as cystitis and thrush.
- Drink plenty of water to reduce the risk of urinary tract infections.

Contraception issues

Suggestions include:

- It may be a good idea to take enough oral contraceptive pills to last you the entire trip, as your brand may not be available overseas.
- Travellers' diarrhoea is a common illness. Remember that diarrhoea and vomiting can reduce the effectiveness of the oral contraceptive pill.
- Certain medications, including some antimalarial drugs and antibiotics, can reduce the effectiveness of the pill. Check with your doctor.
- Pack condoms and use them each and every time you have sexual intercourse.

Pregnant travellers

Suggestions include:

- Avoid countries where malaria is present. Both the disease and certain antimalarial drugs are dangerous to unborn babies.
- Avoid travelling to any developing countries due to the risk of disease and the comparatively low standard of medical care.
- Be careful to avoid food poisoning, as certain infections can harm the baby or trigger miscarriage. Generally, avoid food buffets, seafood and undercooked meats. Wash hands thoroughly after going to the toilet, before preparing food and before eating.
- Avoid smoked fish, coleslaw, pate, sliced deli meats and soft ripened cheeses as these can cause the serious infection listeriosis.
- Some airlines won't allow a woman over 35 weeks gestation to fly. Others may require a doctor's certificate. Check before booking your ticket.
- Some travel insurance policies may not cover pregnancy. Check the fine print.
- Avoid any activities that could harm your unborn baby, such as water skiing, scuba diving and hot saunas.

Travelling with children

Suggestions include:

- Thieves tend to target women travelling with young children simply because the women are often distracted and not able to hold onto their handbags. Wear your valuables in a belt next to your skin.
- If you are unsure of the availability of baby products at your destination, take enough supplies to last you the entire trip.
- Breastfeeding in public is considered offensive in some countries. Check beforehand to avoid unpleasant attention.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Airline
- Travel agent
- Australian embassy.

Things to remember

- Dress appropriately to avoid unpleasant attention.
- Carry with you at all times the contact details of the Australian embassy in your city.
- Take enough regular medication, feminine hygiene products and contraceptives to last the entire trip.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

North East Valley Division of General Practice

Copyright © 1999/2009 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.