
Food safety while travelling

Summary

- Traveller's diarrhoea and other food-related illnesses are common while travelling.
 - To keep yourself well while you are away, practise good personal hygiene and make informed choices about food and drink.
 - If you do get sick, don't panic. Most cases of traveller's diarrhoea will clear up in a few days. But there are instances where you may need medical help.
 - Don't forget to check which vaccinations you need at least six to eight weeks before you leave.
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Travelling, eating and drinking go together. But, unfortunately, traveller's diarrhoea and other food-related illnesses can sometimes come along for the ride. The good news is there are simple things you can do to reduce your chances of getting sick while travelling. And if you do happen to fall ill on holidays, chances are you will be back on the road after a few (quite unpleasant) days.

Common food-related illnesses for travellers

Traveller's diarrhoea is a common digestive tract disorder that is usually caused by eating contaminated food or drinking contaminated water. Symptoms can include:

- frequent and loose stools
- **abdominal discomfort (cramps and pain)**
- nausea
- vomiting
- **fever.**

Traveller's diarrhoea usually clears up on its own in a few days. But sometimes you may need medical assistance.

Some food-related illnesses are vaccine preventable

Other (more serious) food-related illnesses include **hepatitis A**, **typhoid** and **cholera**. These are all vaccine-preventable diseases. If you think you may be travelling to places where the risk is high, **organise vaccines at least six to eight weeks before you go**.

Ask your doctor or a specialist travel clinic for more information and keep up to date with the latest travel health advice on **Smarttraveller**.

Make personal hygiene a priority when travelling

The best way to keep safe from common travel illnesses is to be extra careful with your **personal hygiene**. **Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water** after going to the toilet, and before eating or **preparing food** – and try not to put your fingers in your mouth. If you are **travelling with young children**, be extra vigilant.

If clean water is not readily available, use some disposable wipes or an alcohol-based hand sanitiser.

Safe drinking water when travelling

Drinking water is the best way to stay hydrated when you are travelling. Some simple ways to **make sure water is safe** include:

- Drink bottled water from a reliable source – check the seal is intact before you drink.
- Use bottled water to brush your teeth.
- Boil tap water – bring it to a rolling boil (where you can see large bubbles).
- Use a water purifier.
- Chemically disinfect water by using iodine-based drinking water tablets.
- Steer clear of ice cubes unless you know for sure that they are made from safe bottled water. Freezing water preserves germs!

Make good choices about what you eat and drink

If you are planning to eat and drink your way around the world, here are a few tips to help keep you safe from food-related illnesses:

- Food cooked at high heat is usually safe to eat – so you can feel quite confident about tucking into a plate of steaming hot food!
- Be cautious of food that is cooked and then kept warm or at room temperature (such as buffets).
- The same rule applies to hot drinks. If you are served a steaming hot cup of tea or coffee, it should be fine to drink. Be cautious of drinks served warm or at room temperature.
- Dry, packaged and factory sealed food (such as bread, potato chips and canned tuna) are usually safe to eat – check packaging is not damaged before you open it.
- Raw food can be risky – avoid cut up fresh fruit and vegetables unless you know they were washed in safe water and cut up by someone wearing gloves or with good hand hygiene. Salads, raw meat and uncooked seafood are also more likely to contain germs that may end up making you sick.
- Street food is a great way to experience local culture, and good for your wallet too. But these stalls probably won't have the same hygiene standards as restaurants. The best approach is to choose steaming hot food straight off the grill.
- **If you are pregnant** or have a weakened **immune system**, avoid **unpasteurised dairy products** (such as milk, yoghurt and cheese).

Treatment for food-related illness when travelling

If you do happen to get sick with **traveller's diarrhoea** (or **food poisoning**) while you are away, don't panic. You should be back on deck in a couple of days. In the meantime:

- Make yourself as comfortable as possible at the place where you are staying – plan to stay put for a few days. Your body needs rest, fluids and a bathroom.
- Take anti-diarrhoea or anti-vomiting medication (such as a loperamide-based medicine like Imodium). If you do not have any in your bag, head to a local pharmacy. Or, better still, send your travelling companion so you can stay in bed.
- Keep drinking clean water or oral rehydration drinks. Small sips often will help your body keep it down.
- Listen to your body. When you start feeling ready to eat again, stick to simple food like toast, crackers, bananas and rice.

When to seek medical attention

Sometimes a bout of food poisoning or traveller's diarrhoea will need medical attention. Contact a doctor or go to a hospital as soon as you can if you experience:

- frequent vomiting (for more than two days)
- severe **diarrhoea** (for more than three days)
- blood in your vomit or diarrhoea
- high **fever (39°C or over)**
- extreme **abdominal pain**
- signs of dehydration (such as dizziness or a dry mouth).

Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- Visit a doctor, hospital or health service in the area where you are staying
- A pharmacist
- A travel health clinic
- Your **travel insurance company**
- **Smartraveller**
- For urgent assistance while overseas contact the Australian Government's 24-hour Consular Emergency Centre on : +61 2 6261 3305 (from overseas), 1300 555 135 (from within Australia) and +61 421 269 080 (SMS)
- The **Australian embassy or consulate** in the country you are in and follow the telephone prompts. (Most will have a list of local doctors or hospitals. If you do not speak the language, ask for someone who speaks English.)

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Travel Clinics Australia

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