

will plunk down thousands to be dumped in a disease-ridden remote hellhole for a little kayaking or hiking.

The odds of coming down with a bug are pretty good once you leave the antiseptic Western world. If you go off on an extended trip (one month or more), you have a 60 to 75 percent chance that you will develop some illness or problem, most likely diarrhea. Only about 1 percent of travelers will pick up an infectious disease. I once thought that the locals had built up resistance to the various bugs that strike down Westerners. But once in-country, you realize what a toll disease takes on the third world. Not only are many people riddled with malaria, river blindness, intestinal infections, hepatitis, sexual diseases, and more, but they are also faced with malnutrition, poor dental care, toxic chemicals, and harsh environmental conditions. WHO recently reported that much of the world's population dies needlessly from preventable diseases due to a lack of access to health care.

I am often asked, "How can you protect yourself against the many health threats that are out there?" The answer is, "You can't." But learn as much as you can about each and every affliction that awaits you and get all the available shots for tetanus, yellow fever, hepatitis B and C, cholera, and others. You can take prophylaxis for malaria and some other strains. All those shots and expensive pills do not guarantee you will not get malaria, dengue, sleeping sickness, and a whole host of resistant, unknown strains of vector-borne diseases. And unfortunately, there are diseases in some places that your doctor does not know about and even baffle the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There are diseases that look benign and then make your life a living hell forever. Don't assume that there are safe and unsafe places in the tropics. Talk to your doctor and local doctors, and take a look on the Web if you really are concerned.

Here is the drill if you want to maintain your health, or at least leave a good-looking corpse (with that extra *DP* advice your doctor and trusty guide just don't have the heart to tell you):

- There is a plethora of information available online at the Centers for Disease Control (<http://www.cdc.gov>). You can check out diseases, disease outbreaks, travel advice, and precautions, and find plenty of reasons never to leave your house (unless of course your home has radon, toxic waste, carpet mites, etc.).
- Those who find reality shows a little dull can also bone up at WHO's disease outbreak site (<http://www.who.int/disease-outbreak-news>). Get the latest scoop on legionellosis in Spain or cholera in Chad. Special attention is paid to tourist concerns because tourists have

habit of being the equivalent of poop flies and spreading exotic diseases into not-exotic home regions.

- If you really, really want to find a reason to built a large plastic bubble and live in it, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/index.htm> and search to your heart's content on infectious diseases.

There are plenty of other Web sites that deal with travel health, prevention, and tips. Very few, of course, deal with what the hell to do after blood starts oozing out of your eyes (a symptom of Ebola for you medical-trivia fans).

If you've read up and can deal with the idea of pulling tapeworms out of your butt by rolling them on a stick, and you are now packing, what do you have to do physically before you leave? Meet with a specialist in either tropical disease or travel medicine at least two months before departure. Have a complete checkup; discuss what preventative measures should be taken. Important! Do not do this a week before you leave. Some shots require up to six weeks to take effect. Your doctor should consult with the latest CDC info and give you a lecture on cleanliness, eating, and so on.

What you need to know about food and contamination is simple. Eat lightly and eat as freshly as possible. Disease can be carried by vectors (insects, ticks, animals) and also in the food and fluids you ingest. If you make sure that what goes in your mouth has been boiled, heated to a high temperature, or sealed (as in store bought), you should be okay. Keep in mind that a hermetically sealed bottle of water, handed to you by a diseased vendor, that has been soaking in toxic river water to keep cool, can defeat the purpose of this exercise. Also, do not believe for a second that hotels or large restaurants have any guarantee of cleanliness or sanitation. Usually the opposite is true. Food is left out for long periods of time at low temperatures and water is stored in cisterns on the roof—perfect warm places for bacteria and dead rats. Keep in mind that freshly boiled soups and food that is cooked thoroughly and freshly in front of you are your best bets. Bottled water and tea are the best drinking choices. Strangely, eating in private homes will solve most of your health concerns. So make friends.

When you get the runs, don't freak out and glug down the Imodium—it's a normal readjustment. Just drink plenty of fluids, use the oral rehydration kits to supplement your fluids, and ease off on the food. If you think you don't feel well, see a local doctor. You might be surprised to discover how cheap and knowledgeable they are. Socialized medicine has its advantages.

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