

Staying healthy and safe while Backpacking

General

The continuous upsurge in backpacking holidays leads to some difficulty for those of us trying to advise on good health care so that your personal health can be protected to the greatest possible extent during this trip. Vaccines, avoiding mosquito bites, what to eat and drink and many other issues need to be covered by the travel doctor.

Personal health

It is essential to ensure that your personal health will be sufficient for the trip you have planned. If you have a significant medical condition (eg heart problems, diabetes, epilepsy, asthma etc) then it will be important to talk this through in great detail to make sure you are not taking unnecessary risks. If you have never camped in the Dublin Mountains how come you think you will be able to cope with a tent on the Thai/Myanmar border or in some hut at 18,000 feet in Nepal!

Alone or Group Travel

Many backpackers plan to travel alone but they may meet up with other similar adventurers while abroad. It is certainly safer not to travel alone but, be aware that there may be risks also with your newly found travelling companions. Take care before you agree to travel with any unknown companion. If possible, over a few days, find out some details of their home and family and see what you may have in common. Look at any family photographs and try to see how open they are about themselves. Remember you know nothing about them and many backpackers run into huge difficulties by trusting another without due care. Nevertheless, travelling alone does place high risks on both personal health and also for looking after your belongings so in general it is safer to travel with others.

Safety & Security

Watch your belongings at all times. Don't carry any item that is of sentimental value. Don't flaunt any personal wealth. **Never carry any items for another person** and, especially if you have not had your belonging with you at all times, **carry out a very careful check before you travel through any custom checkpoint.** Being in possession of any illegal drugs is a very serious offence in many regions. Also, before going through any custom checkpoint try not to look like a dishevelled backpacker! Get 'respectable' and don't stick out in the crowd.

Location & Duration

Obviously where you will be trekking in the world and the time spent there will be crucial from the health point of view. In many countries the facilities for backpackers are excellent - providing you stick with the 'usual' routes. However, the attraction of backpacking is the ability to wander and clearly this may bring you to regions within countries where the stability, and possible the risk of disease outbreaks are increases. Medical facilities in these remote regions are usually poor or non-existent. Try to have a good basic travel plan and, where possible, stick with your itinerary. Any change may invalidate the healthcare advice you were given before leaving home (or your travel insurance) so be careful.

Nighttimes & Nightclubs

Many backpackers will rest during the day and 'party' throughout the evening hours. Ask around and then choose clubs frequented by other backpackers. Remember to watch your belongings and particularly your drinks. Many travellers tell of having suffered serious consequences (eg robbery and rape) after being given a 'spiked' drink. If you are unsure, get a fresh drink rather than take any chances. **To get back to your lodging never travel alone** and always *use authorised taxis* where possible. Carry \$20 - \$50 in small notes separately somewhere on your person in case you are mugged. Don't resist if you are confronted ~ it is just not worth the risk.

Home Contact

Always make certain that your family are kept in touch with your current location, your state of health and any possible changes in your itinerary. Let them know about your travelling companions especially if they change along your route. Web cafés will be common in many regions - **just make sure you have taught your parents to read email before you leave!**

Food & Water

Backpackers tend to travel on the cheap and the quality and amount of food they have may be quite compromised at times. Remember that your body needs fuel and good food and water are essential items. Allocate adequate funds to ensuring that these are maintained. *Remember everyone's stomach is different and just because your travelling companions are keen to experiment with their food intake does not mean you should.* Taking daily multivitamins is usually worthwhile though these will not compensate for a good balanced diet. Assume all tap water may be contaminated and use boiled or sealed bottled water at all times for drinking and brushing your teeth. **Many trekkers develop various bowel parasites while abroad because of eating unwise foods.** *Top of the list are lettuce and shellfish!* Food from street vendors may be the only available option but as a last resort make certain it is fresh and fully cooked or else eat fruit that you peel yourself.

Mosquitoes and Bites

Many backpackers will chose cheap accommodation and frequently there will be no mosquito nets over the beds, holes in the window netting and also plenty of bed bugs! Remember to bring good repellent, a net if travelling in an area where mosquitoes may be a problem and to purchase a can of knockdown insect repellent on arrival in each area. Spray your room each evening especially around the door and window frames and under the bed. Treat any bites early and don't allow them fester. **Rabies is a common disease in many regions** where you may travel and so take care to avoid contact with all animals. *Treat any bite very seriously and get competent medical attention as soon as possible.*

Malaria Prophylaxis

If you are travelling in regions where malaria is a problem you probably will have been advised to take adequate prophylaxis before leaving home. As you travel around and meet new companions you will hear many opinions and stories about malaria tablets. Please be sensible and take care before changing the medical advice you received before leaving home. If unsure, use the contact facilities you were given to ask for further advice. The Tropical Medical Bureau provides an email advice facility though this cannot be seen as a substitute for a detailed medical consultation at any time.

Vaccinations

The backpacker will be at higher risk of a variety of diseases while abroad and will generally require a more extensive vaccine programme. These may include 'extra' vaccines like **Hepatitis B, Rabies, Meningitis, Japanese Encephalitis** etc. Make sure you have plenty of time to complete the necessary courses before you leave if at all possible. Sometimes the doctor may suggest carrying an emergency antibiotic in case you can't find competent medical attention.

Summary

The health risks associated with backpacking can be minimised providing you remember to pack plenty of commonsense and to exercise it constantly while abroad. Be suspicious, be careful and be constantly in contact with home. For further information see <http://www.tmb.ie/generaladvice.asp?id=23> or other leaflets on the TMB web pages <http://www.tmb.ie/generaladvice.asp>



National Travel Vaccine Appointment Tel 1-850-48 76 74

Web Address: www.tmb.ie

This leaflet has been prepared using information supplied from WHO, the Center for Disease Control (US) and other international sources.

- ✓ Travel Accessories *Backpacking/TMB/updated7Nov2007*
- ✓ Tropical Diagnostic Laboratory
- ✓ Tropical Disease Screening Centre
- ✓ W.H.O. registered Yellow Fever Vaccination Centre
- ✓ International Vaccination and Malaria Advice Centres

Aston Quay/Usit
Blanchardstown
Bray
Clarehall
Cork
Dun Laoghaire
Galway
Gorey

Grafton Street
Inchicore
Kerry
Letterkenny
Limerick
Maynooth
Naas
Ongar

Shannon
Sligo
Stillorgan
Tinahely
Walkinstown
Waterford