

Infectious Diseases

Traveller's Diarrhea

June 2009



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What is Traveller's Diarrhea?

Traveller's Diarrhea is the most common ailment of travellers to the tropics. It goes by several names depending upon where you are, such as Montezuma's Revenge, Delhi Belly and Sleeping Sickness. Your risk of developing diarrhea depends on your destination (some places are worse than others), the precautions you take, and plain old luck (some people are luckier than others).

What are the causes?

You may become infected through:

- the water you drink
- ice cubes you use
- food that is washed by water such as fruits and vegetables
- people handling your food
- the flies landing on your food
- food that is not adequately cooked.

There are many causes of diarrhea, most of which are infectious. The most common bacteria that cause diarrhea include *E. coli*, salmonella, shigella and campylobacter. Parasites or protozoa such as giardia lamblia, Entamoeba histolytica, cyclospora and cryptosporidium occur much less frequently. Cholera, a bacteria, is a very rare cause of diarrhea in travellers.

Diarrhea may be mild with just some cramps and a few loose bowel movements per day. It can also be much more severe. Dysentery refers to diarrhea associated with blood, pus, and fever, and it is usually caused by one of the bacteria.

How can you prevent Traveller's Diarrhea?

Your best bet is to follow the Mexican proverb "**Boil it, bottle it, peel it, cook it or forget it.**"

To purify water, the best method is to boil it.

It is probably not necessary to boil it for 10 minutes, which might result in you losing most of the water. Just bringing it to a rolling boil is probably sufficient. Not everyone is completely trusting of bottled water in the tropics. You should ensure that there is an unbroken seal on the bottle. Iodine, which is available as drops or crystals, will adequately purify your water, but might leave an unpleasant taste. Adding some flavouring will help eliminate that taste.

There are several water "purifiers" on the market. They vary in size, price, mechanism and duration of action. For a good selection, you might consider visiting some well-equipped camping stores.

Vegetables can be cooked, or washed in iodine (bleach) and then rinsed with safe water. Meat should be well-cooked, as undercooked beef, pork or fish can be the source of tapeworms, which may grow to thirty feet in length.

How do you treat Traveller's Diarrhea?

In spite of the above advice and precautions, up to 40% of travellers to the tropics will get the diarrhea. So let's talk about self treatment.

1. Replace your fluid losses with oral rehydrations salts (ORS, Gastrolyte), flat, carbonated drinks, soups (add salt), tea (add sugar) or water, if it is clean.
2. Lighten your diet. Avoid milk products. Try eating bananas, rice water, and soda biscuits.
3. Antiperistaltics (they slow down your bowel) such as Imodium, can safely be used for mild to moderate non-bloody diarrhea. Pepto Bismol may also provide some symptomatic relief.

There certainly are those who feel that is inadvisable to use antiperistaltics, as they keep the offending bacteria in contact with your bowel for longer.

This view is OK, as long as you have time to get over your diarrhea, and have a good source of toilet paper. It is not OK if you have a plane to catch, a camel to ride, or one day to see the Taj Mahal.

4. Antibiotics, such as Noroxin or Cipro may help, considering that most cases of acute diarrhea are caused by bacteria. For the fastest relief, a combination of Imodium plus the antibiotic is recommended.
5. Some cases, especially the more chronic, may be assumed or proven to be parasitic infections such as giardiasis or amebiasis, which may be treated with drugs such as metronidazole (Flagyl) or tinidazole (Fasigen).