

International Students: Traveling Home

This handout was designed for international students who are traveling home. Sometimes, when people travel abroad to go home or visit friends or relatives (called “VFR travelers” by travel medicine professionals), they can be at higher risk for some diseases. The risk is higher because VFR travelers generally stay longer than tourists, eat local food in people’s homes, and may not take the same precautions (such as preventing bug bites) as tourists do. If you are planning to travel overseas to visit friends or relatives, consider your increased risk of illnesses and plan accordingly.

Malaria

- VFR travelers are 8–10 times as likely to be infected with malaria as tourists, and in recent years, several VFR travelers have died of malaria after they returned to the United States.
- Many VFR travelers assume they are immune to malaria if they were born or lived a long time in a country with malaria, but any immunity disappears quickly after a person moves away.
- If you are going to a country with malaria, take malaria-prevention medicine according to your doctor’s instructions, even if your friends and relatives who still live in the country do not.
- Although you may be able to get malaria medicine more cheaply abroad, the risk of counterfeit medicines is very high. It’s often impossible to tell real and counterfeit medicines apart, so bring all your medicine from the United States.
- It’s also important to start your malaria prophylaxis before you travel for it to be effective.
- Protecting yourself from mosquito bites protects you from not only malaria, but also other insect born diseases such as dengue.

Foodborne Illness

- Illnesses spread through contaminated food are common in VFR travelers, who often feel pressure to eat what they are served by family or friends.
- VFR travelers also do not have the same immunity to local bacteria as their friends and relatives do.
- Some foodborne illnesses, such as hepatitis A and typhoid, can be prevented with vaccines, but many others cannot. Your travel medicine provider can recommend appropriate vaccines and medicines.
- Be careful about what you eat and drink. In general, food that is cooked and served hot is safe to eat, and beverages from sealed containers are safe to drink. Avoid food served at room temperature, raw fruits or vegetables (unless they can be peeled), tap water, and ice made from tap water.

Other Illnesses

Other health considerations for VFR travelers include dengue and other infections spread by mosquitoes as well as parasites in water, tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted diseases. Before your trip, consult a travel medicine specialist who can give you customized advice on staying safe and healthy at your destination.

HEADING HOME HEALTHY

The CDC-supported Heading Home Healthy program (www.HeadingHomeHealthy.org) is focused on reducing travel-related illnesses in VFR travelers. The program contains videos, informational resources, and health tools in multiple languages and was developed to assist VFR travelers.

Adapted from CDC June 2020