

## Health Watch

### Diarrhoea

Welcome to the latest health watch bulletin, an informative series of health articles aimed at helping GAP volunteers and expeditioners. We want to help you stay healthy on your international pursuits!

In this episode Dr Ted Lankester, Director of Health Services and author of the Berlitz Travel Health Guide, focuses on the common yet unglamorous traveller's affliction - diarrhoea.

#### Diarrhoea...as easy to catch as it is difficult to spell!

You're camping in the mountains, trekking through the jungle or about to embark on a 12 hour cross-country bus journey. The last thing you want is an attack of the runs.

But did you know that you have a one in two chance of getting traveller's diarrhoea during a two-week trip to a developing country?

Diarrhoea is difficult to avoid. But there are precautions you can take to significantly reduce your chances of being struck down by Montezuma's Revenge.



#### How to prevent diarrhoea

##### 1. Clean your hands frequently when:

- You are about to eat
- You have just been to the loo
- You have been in contact with animals
- You have been playing with local children
- You have greeted the locals with a handshake
- You have been handling money.

***Ask yourself afterwards: 'Have I cleaned my hands?'***

This may sound obvious, but the importance of regularly washing your hands with soap and water cannot be overestimated. Alcohol wipes or antibacterial hand wash can be used in the absence of water, or as an extra protective measure.

##### 2. Danger foods! Beware of the following:

- **Contaminated water or milk:** Boil it for 1 minute at a vigorous rolling boil and if over 2000 metres for 3 minutes. If water is cloudy, filter it first or let it stand.

- **Ice and ice cream:** Never trust ice and do not allow it to be put in your drink, however tempting. Eat ice cream only from high quality manufacturers where it is known to be safe.
- **Salads and fruits:** Avoid them unless you have prepared them yourself: washed, sterilized and peeled any fruit and cooked any vegetables.
- **Shellfish:** Avoid altogether because it is hard to be sure if they have been cooked to a high enough temperature for long enough.
- **Meat, fish and rice:** All the food you eat should be served piping hot. Meat should be grey or brown, never red; fish should be firm. Rice should never be reheated unless thoroughly re-cooked.
- **Eggs:** Cook until the yolk is firm.
- **Cheese:** This always carries a health risk and should be avoided.
- **Food that has been allowed to cool down, especially if left uncovered.** Avoid it.
- **Table sauces, often contaminated by being diluted with unclean water.** Better not to use.

*Your mantra should be 'cook it, peel it, clean it or forget it'.*

### 3. Don't swim in polluted seas, rivers, lakes and ponds

When swimming, try to avoid getting water into your mouth or swallowing it.

### 4. Use clean, preferably boiled water for cleaning your teeth.

## How to treat diarrhoea

### Keep up the fluids

It is vital that you replace the fluids you are losing to avoid becoming seriously dehydrated. After each trip to the toilet you should aim to sip two glasses of fluids. You can:

- Use oral rehydration salts such as Dioralyte.
- Make your own rehydration solution by adding 8 level teaspoons of sugar and half a level teaspoon of salt to 1 litre of boiled water, or by using a 'TALC' rehydration spoon.
- Use a carbonated drink such as Sprite or Seven-Up, defizzed by some gentle shaking.

### Take loperamide (Imodium)

If you are in danger of losing control of your bowels or you are about to embark on a long bus ride then you are advised to take Imodium.

- This medication acts a blocker, it does not cure diarrhoea. However, it does help to prevent dehydration.
- Adult dosage: take two capsules, then one every six hours if your motions continue loose.

**Please be aware that Loperamide should not be taken if you have dysentery (bloody diarrhoea).**

### **Bad bout or getting worse?**

If you have more than five stools in 24 hours, have a fever or pass blood in your stools you should:

- Seek medical advice *or*
- Take Ciprofloxacin: adult dose 500mg daily. Take for one day if symptoms are relatively mild, extending up to three if they are more severe or you are passing blood.

### **Dysentery**

This means blood in the stools usually with fever. You are also likely to feel unwell, often seriously so. Do not take Loperamide or any blocking agent. You must see a doctor.

As you recover eat a light diet and bland foods, such as soup, rice, toast, bananas and potatoes. It's better to eat small amounts, regularly and to chew well. Avoid any milk or dairy products for several days after the diarrhoea has settled down.

If symptoms persist consult a medical expert. Diarrhoea can be a symptom of a serious infection so you may need further tests and treatment.

### **In summary**

If you are sensible and follow the necessary precautions you can significantly reduce your chances of catching diarrhoea. Unfortunately diarrhoea is often unavoidable and for many travellers in developing countries it is not a matter of if, but when. However, if you travel prepared and follow the correct treatment advice you can prevent diarrhoea seriously interfering with your trip.

InterHealth can provide you with a Diarrhoea Treatment Kit which includes loperamide, Ciprofloxacin and a rehydration measuring spoon. Check out our online TravelShop for more information.

For further information on diarrhoea visit [www.rehydrate.org](http://www.rehydrate.org) or see the Berlitz Travel Health Pocket Guide.



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